



AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES AS CATALYSTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: LOCALISING GLOBAL AND CONTINENTAL AGENDAS

Dejo Olowu¹ 

1. Professor, School of Law, Walter Sisulu University, Private Bag X1, Mthatha 5117, Eastern Cape, South Africa, Email: djolowu1@yahoo.co.uk, Mobile: +27-76-993-4384

Article Information:

Article Type:
Research Article

Manuscript Received:
13 February 2025

Final Revision Received:
25 April 2026

Published Online:
15 May 2026

Keywords:
African Universities;
Agenda 2063; Capacity
Building; Higher
Education; Knowledge
Translation; Policy Impact;
Sustainable Development
Goals (SDGs).

This paper examines the evolving role of African universities within contemporary development discourse, drawing on emerging literature that highlights the expanding functions of higher education institutions in knowledge economies, innovation systems, and evidence-informed policymaking. Recent studies emphasise that universities are no longer confined to teaching and research; they are increasingly recognised as key societal actors capable of driving socio-economic transformation through community engagement, knowledge translation, and multi-sectoral collaboration. Building on these insights, the paper argues that African universities occupy a strategic position from which to influence the localisation of global and continental development frameworks, particularly the SDGs and the African Union's Agenda 2063. The literature reveals persistent challenges, including weak research-policy linkages, fragmented innovation ecosystems, and limited institutional capacities, that constrain African states' progress on development targets. In this context, the paper contends that universities can expand their contribution by working across disciplinary, institutional, and geographic boundaries to address complex, interconnected development challenges. Through a review of scholarly analyses and illustrative case studies, the paper demonstrates that no single state or institution can achieve development goals in isolation. Effective leadership, strengthened partnerships including engagement with local communities, and context-specific mechanisms are necessary to translate knowledge into policy and practice. The paper concludes that African universities, if adequately supported and institutionally aligned with national and continental priorities, can serve as catalysts in localising development agendas and advancing sustainable progress across the region.

Cite this article: Dejo Olowu (2027). African Universities as Catalysts of Sustainable Development: Localising Global and Continental Agendas. Vol. 18:1. 23-60. DOI: 10.4314/jsdlp.v18i1.2.



© The Author(s)

Publisher: Institute for Oil, Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development (OGEES Institute), Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, universities are not merely seen as necessary; they are viewed as crucial to human growth and progress, in the long and short term. Against the backdrop of the specific and implicit roles envisaged for universities under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the grim reality of Africa's performance on the SDGs summons a reconsideration of the place and role of African universities in charting the future of development in the region. This becomes even more relevant in light of recent concerns with the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) for Africa's sustainable development beyond the 2030 deadline set under the SDGs.

In an era defined by interconnectivity, sustainability challenges, and the need for inclusive development, the relevance of universities as actors in shaping social and economic progress has expanded significantly. The traditional functions of universities, namely education, research, and knowledge production, are no longer sufficient benchmarks of institutional excellence. Instead, universities, especially those in Africa, are being called to become proactive agents in tackling systemic underdevelopment by engaging more holistically with the societies they serve.

African states, many of which are lagging behind global and continental targets, face significant challenges in meeting the SDGs, which are set to expire in 2030. Recent scholarship and policy discussions indicate that the complex, interdependent nature of the SDGs necessitates the inclusion of higher education institutions as strategic stakeholders and transformative partners in the realisation of the SDGs and their targets.¹ The African

1 United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015) <<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>> accessed 10 December 2025. Akemi Ashida, 'The Role of Higher Education in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' in Shujiro Urata, Kazuo Kuroda and Yoshiko Tonegawa (eds) *Sustainable Development Disciplines for Humanity. Sustainable Development Goals Series*. (Springer 2025) 71, 72; Brendan O'Malley and Rebecca Warden, 'Global "Roadmap to 2030" for Higher Education Announced' (*University World News* 25 May 2022) <<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220525095453173>> accessed 10

Union's Agenda 2063, which offers a long-term development vision for Africa, places education and knowledge at the heart of continental transformation.² Despite this recognition, operational mechanisms for translating these aspirations into grounded actions remain limited and fragmented across national borders.

This paper argues that African universities are ideally placed to act as development catalysts by localising global and continental agendas through community engagement, knowledge translation, and multi-sectoral collaboration. It further argues that the challenges of African development are too complex and entrenched to be addressed by governments alone. Universities represent untapped potential with intellectual capital, institutional infrastructure, and social legitimacy. This paper examines the evolving role of African universities as catalysts for sustainable development and their capacity to localise global and continental development agendas. It addresses key sub-themes, including the paper's objectives, a focused literature review and conceptual framework, the expanding responsibilities of universities in 21st-century development, systemic challenges and opportunities, thematic approaches such as community engagement and knowledge translation, illustrative case studies, and strategic recommendations for repositioning African universities within the development ecosystem. Central to the paper's argument is the proposition that African universities must move beyond

December 2025; Yojana Sharma, 'United Nations – Why Universities Need to Look Ahead to 2050' (*University World News* 2 June 2022) <<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220602113751595>> accessed 10 December 2025; Brendan O'Malley, Survey Shows Universities Accelerating Action for SDGs' (*University World News* 11 February 2023) <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230211062743570&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AFNL0393> accessed 10 December 2025; and Nic Mitchell, 'Transformation Asks Us to Move Beyond Modernisation Agenda' (*University World News* 28 October 2022) <<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20221028092116627>> accessed 10 December 2025.

2 African Union, Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want – Framework Document (AU 2015) <https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Policy-Documents/Agenda2063_Popular_Version_English.pdf> accessed 10 December 2025. See also Lusanda Batala, 'Global, Continental, and Regional Development Agendas—What Does It Mean to Domesticate or Localise These?' (2021) 87(2) *The Thinker* 37, 39 <<https://doi.org/10.36615/thethinker.v87i2.531>> accessed 10 December 2025.

the traditional ‘ivory tower’ model and embed themselves more deeply in the social, economic, and developmental realities of their communities, nations, and regions.

The paper is organised into six interconnected parts. The first part introduces the paper’s central premise: that African universities must transcend conventional teaching and research roles to become active drivers of societal transformation. It establishes that sustainable development cannot be achieved by any single actor in isolation and that universities are uniquely positioned to contribute to collaborative efforts aimed at achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2063. The second part presents the literature review and conceptual framework, demonstrating that while African universities possess significant untapped potential to advance sustainable development, they face persistent institutional, structural, and epistemic constraints. The literature converges around three key themes: the need for systemic institutional change, the centrality of engagement in development work, and the pivotal role of people, including students, staff, and external stakeholders, in translating policy into practice. These insights inform the conceptual framework guiding the analysis.

The third part examines the SDGs and Agenda 2063 as the dominant global and continental development frameworks shaping Africa’s development trajectory. It argues that while these agendas articulate ambitious and complementary visions, their effectiveness depends on deliberate localisation and operationalisation within national and community contexts. Africa’s uneven performance on the SDGs highlights structural constraints and the limitations of top-down approaches, revealing universities as critical yet underutilised actors in education, research, and innovation. The fourth part examines the evolving role of African universities, shifting from insular institutions to civic anchors embedded in development systems. It highlights the growing importance of universities in knowledge-based economies, capacity development, ethical leadership, and social cohesion, with community engagement identified as a key mechanism for translating development agendas into locally grounded action. Case studies from across the continent demonstrate how universities effectively integrate teaching, research,

engagement, and policy advocacy to achieve tangible development outcomes.

The fifth part analyses the challenges and opportunities associated with repositioning African universities as development actors, offering strategic policy and institutional recommendations towards that end. It foregrounds knowledge translation as a crucial yet underdeveloped function, constrained by underfunding, rigid incentive structures, weak research–policy linkages, fragmented academic cultures, and limited institutional autonomy. Despite these barriers, opportunities such as Africa’s demographic dividend, digital transformation, pan-African collaboration, diversified funding, and emerging models of engaged scholarship offer pathways for reform. The sixth part sums up the paper’s arguments and reinforces the case for strategic, institutionally grounded approaches to enabling African universities to play a transformative role in sustainable development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Literature Review

Scholarship on the roles of African universities in advancing sustainable development has expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting growing recognition that higher education institutions are central to the localisation of global and continental agendas. The existing literature demonstrates that universities in Africa are not only knowledge producers but are also increasingly required to act as facilitators of social transformation, brokers of development partnerships, and catalysts for integrating sustainability into public policy and everyday practice.

Nhamo’s work, which focuses on the University of South Africa (UNISA) as a case study, provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of how an African university has attempted to institutionalise the SDGs across

governance structures, academic programmes, and operational systems.³ His ‘whole institution, all goals and entire sector’ approach demonstrates that effective localisation of the SDGs requires systemic transformation, strategic leadership, and alignment of university missions with national development priorities. Nhamo’s later work with Chapungu and Dube expands on this premise, utilising empirical insights from Zimbabwe to demonstrate how academic staff perceptions influence the depth and quality of SDG integration.⁴ Together, these studies underscore that localisation is both a technical and cultural undertaking influenced by institutional values, governance, and staff agency.

Motala, Sayed and Maggott adopted a more critical stance by interrogating the extent to which African universities have undergone genuine transformation in response to the SDG agenda.⁵ They argue that although universities have adopted sustainability rhetoric, deeper epistemic and structural changes, particularly those aligned with decolonial aspirations, remain deferred. Their analysis highlights a misalignment between global normative agendas and local institutional realities, emphasising the need for universities to contextualise sustainability within African epistemologies and development challenges.

Beyond institutional analysis, broader discussions of global and regional development agendas, offer conceptual clarity on what localisation entails.

3 Godwell Nhamo, ‘Localisation of SDGs in Higher Education: Unisa’s Whole Institution, All Goals and Entire Sector Approach’ (2021) 37 *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education* 63, 74-77 <<https://doi.org/10.4314/sajee.v37i1.5>> accessed 10 December 2025.

4 Godwell Nhamo, Lovemore Chapungu and Kudakwashe Dube, ‘Universities and Sustainable Development Goals Localisation: Insights from Academic Staff in Zimbabwe’ (2024) 11(1) *Cogent Education* 2428877, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2428877>> accessed 10 December 2025. See also Godwell Nhamo and Lovemore Chapungu, ‘Seven Years of Embracing the Sustainable Development Goals: Perspectives from University of South Africa’s Academic Staff’ (2024) 9 *Frontiers in Education* 1354916, para 4, providing statistical evidence that UNISA staff were embedding SDGs into core mandate areas (teaching, research, engagement). It demonstrates a practical application of the SDGs in daily academic life.

5 Shireen Motala, Yusuf YM Sayed and Thando Maggott, ‘The SDG Agenda and University Transformation in Africa: The Decolonial Turn Deferred?’ (2023) 12(2) *African Journal of Teacher Education* 189, 196 <<https://doi.org/10.21083/ajote.v12i2.7518>> accessed 10 December 2025..

Batala, for example, provides a clear exposition of domestication and localisation, explaining that these processes involve more than technical adjustment: they require reinterpreting global commitments through local priorities, identities, and governance systems.⁶ This perspective is crucial for understanding how Agenda 2063 and the SDGs can be meaningfully embedded within African universities' strategic and academic practices.

The literature also points to the importance of student awareness and engagement. Boafo, Boakye-Danquah, Boakye-Danquah, Lartey and Obeng-Odoom, in a comparative analysis of Ghanaian university students, identify knowledge, institutional exposure, and curriculum integration as key enablers of student participation in sustainable development.⁷ Their findings reveal that universities serve as important socialisation spaces where future leaders acquire attitudes and competences essential for development governance.

Other scholars emphasise the importance of human capital and staff roles in achieving sustainable development. Igenegbai and Osasuyi highlight teaching workforce policy in Nigeria as a critical entry point for improving educational quality, which, in turn, directly influences the achievement of national and global development goals.⁸ Dania and Okobia reach similar conclusions in their examination of staff awareness at the University of Benin, arguing that capacity-building and institutional support structures are essential for embedding sustainability competencies.⁹ These studies collectively show that localisation depends heavily on staff capability, awareness, and motivation.

6 Batala (n 2) 37-39.

7 Yaw Agyeman Boafo, John Boakye-Danquah, Eric Boakye-Danquah, Doreen Larkailley Lartey and Alexander Obeng-Odoom, 'Perceptions and Enablers of Sustainable Development: A Comparative Study of Ghanaian University Students' Engagement with the SDGs' (2025) 89(5) *Higher Education* 1321, 1332-1333.

8 Philip Igenegbai and Michael Osakpamwan Osasuyi, 'Implementing the Teaching Manpower Policy in Nigeria: An Imperative for Sustainable Development' in Eghosa O. Ekhatior, Servel Miller and Etinosa Igbinsosa (eds), *Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria* (Routledge 2021) 51, 54-55.

9 Omoyebagbe Rosaline Dania and Esther Obiageli Okobia, 'Staff Awareness of the Role of Education in Sustainable Development Goals: Evidence from the University of Benin' in

Regionally, Tikly offers a comprehensive critique of African sustainable development agendas, arguing that although frameworks such as Agenda 2063 promote important aspirations, they often lack precise operational mechanisms for integrating sustainability into educational systems.¹⁰ His critique establishes the need for a more grounded, context-sensitive conceptualisation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) that addresses structural inequalities and governance weaknesses.

Finally, Enechi and Pattberg contribute to the literature on multi-stakeholder partnerships by identifying sustainability awareness, institutional incentives, and stakeholder trust as determinants of participation in development partnerships.¹¹ Their work provides valuable insights into the relational dimensions of localisation, especially in contexts where universities collaborate with governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), and international agencies.

The literature demonstrates a growing consensus that African universities occupy a strategically important, though underutilised, position in advancing sustainable development at national, regional, and continental levels. Across multiple studies, universities are increasingly recognised as actors that extend beyond their traditional mandates of teaching and research to include community engagement, innovation, policy influence, and partnership-building.

First, existing scholarship shows that localising global development agendas such as the SDGs requires systemic institutional transformation within universities. Studies focusing on institutional approaches reveal that fragmented or symbolic adoption of sustainability frameworks has limited developmental impact. Instead, whole-institution strategies—

Eghosa O. Ekhatior, Servel Miller and Etinosa Igbinsosa (eds), *Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria* (Routledge 2021) 208, 212.

10 Leon Tikly, 'Education for Sustainable Development in Africa: A Critique of Regional Agendas' (2019) 20(2) *Asia Pacific Education Review* 223, 231 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-019-09600-5>> accessed 10 December 2025.

11 Okechukwu Enechi and Philipp Pattberg, 'What Determines Participation in Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships? Assessing Sustainability Awareness and Knowledge' (2025) 6(104) *Discover Sustainability* 3-5 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-00884-9>> accessed 10 December 2025.

where governance, curriculum, research, and operations are aligned with development goals—are more effective in embedding sustainability into higher education practice.

Second, the literature highlights that knowledge translation remains a critical bottleneck. While African universities generate substantial research output, much of this knowledge fails to inform policy or practice due to weak research–policy linkages, limited communication infrastructures, and misaligned academic incentive systems. This disconnect undermines the developmental potential of higher education and reinforces the gap between global commitments and local outcomes.

Third, research indicates that human agency matters. Academic staff awareness, student engagement, and leadership commitment strongly influence how sustainability agendas are interpreted and implemented. Studies on student perceptions and staff capacity demonstrate that universities serve as socialisation spaces where sustainability norms, competencies, and values are cultivated, shaping future leadership and governance cultures.

Fourth, the literature underscores persistent structural and epistemic tensions. Critical analyses argue that African universities often adopt global development agendas without sufficient contextualisation, leading to superficial compliance rather than meaningful transformation. These tensions reflect deeper challenges related to colonial legacies, resource constraints, governance weaknesses, and externally driven policy priorities.

Finally, the literature affirms that multi-stakeholder partnerships are indispensable for sustainable development. Universities are most effective when embedded in collaborative ecosystems involving governments, communities, civil society, and the private sector. However, participation in such partnerships depends on trust, institutional incentives, and sustainability awareness—factors that are unevenly distributed across African contexts.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research draws on three interconnected constructs emerging from the literature: (1) universities as developmental agents, (2) localisation of global and continental agendas, and (3) knowledge translation as the mechanism linking research, policy, and practice.

2.2.1 Universities as Developmental Agents

Building on Nhamo's institutional approach,¹² and Motala, Sayed and Maggott's critique,¹³ African universities are conceptualised as multifunctional development actors whose responsibilities transcend teaching and research. They operate as hubs of knowledge production, centres of leadership development, and catalysts for societal transformation. This conceptualisation reflects Agenda 2063's emphasis on 'well-educated citizens and skills revolution underpinned by science, technology and innovation.'¹⁴

2.2.2 Localisation of Global and Continental Agendas

Drawing on Batala's exposition of domestication,¹⁵ localisation is defined as the process through which global frameworks (e.g., the SDGs) and continental visions (e.g., Agenda 2063) are translated into institutionally relevant goals, practices, and governance structures. Localisation involves reinterpretation, contextualisation, and operationalisation. It is a dynamic negotiation between global norms and local realities, requiring universities to align their strategic missions with the developmental needs of their communities, regions, and nations.

¹² Nhamo (n 3) *ibid*.

¹³ Motala, Sayed and Maggott (n 5) *ibid*.

¹⁴ African Union, Agenda 2063 (n 2) 12.

¹⁵ Batala (n 2) *ibid*.

2.2.3 Knowledge Translation as a Bridging Mechanism

Grounded in evidence from both Boafo, Boakye-Danquah, Boakye-Danquah, Lartey and Obeng-Odoom's student-focused analysis,¹⁶ and studies on staff awareness by Dania and Okobia,¹⁷ knowledge translation is conceptualised as the mechanism through which universities make research accessible, usable, and actionable. It involves both internal processes (such as curriculum design, staff development, and research communication) and external processes (including partnerships, policy engagement, and community outreach). Enechi and Pattberg's research on multi-stakeholder partnerships further illuminates how knowledge translation is strengthened or constrained by institutional incentives, trust, and stakeholder dynamics.¹⁸

Together, these theoretical pillars form a framework that positions African universities as central actors in the localisation of sustainable development agendas. They achieve this through institutional transformation, contextualised engagement with development frameworks, and effective translation of knowledge into policy and practice. This framework guides the analysis presented in subsequent sections.

This study contributes to scholarship on African higher education and sustainable development by integrating fragmented strands of literature on university transformation, Education for Sustainable Development, knowledge translation, and the localisation of global and continental development agendas. It advances existing work by reframing African universities as active developmental agents rather than passive implementers of externally defined goals. By foregrounding localisation, the study shifts analytical attention from policy compliance to institutional agency, leadership, and context-specific engagement. Conceptually, the study introduces a structured framework that links universities' developmental roles, localisation processes, and knowledge translation mechanisms, addressing a critical gap in how research impact

16 Boafo, Boakye-Danquah, Boakye-Danquah, Lartey and Obeng-Odoom (n 7) 1329-1331.

17 Dania and Okobia (n 9) *ibid*.

18 Enechi and Pattberg (n 11) *ibid*.

and policy influence are understood within African contexts. The framework offers a transferable analytical tool for examining university engagement with the SDGs and Agenda 2063 across diverse institutional settings. Empirically grounded in African experiences, this contribution enhances theoretical clarity while offering practical insights for policymakers, university leaders, and development practitioners seeking to leverage higher education as a catalyst for sustainable development.

3. GLOBAL AND CONTINENTAL FRAMEWORKS FOR DEVELOPMENT: SDGS AND AGENDA 2063

Both global and continental frameworks significantly influence the development trajectory of African countries. The United Nations SDGs and the African Union's Agenda 2063 are chief among these. While conceived at different institutional levels, these frameworks are interlinked in their vision of equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development. The challenge lies in operationalising these goals within local contexts and translating high-level aspirations into impactful grassroots interventions.

3.1 The Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs)

Adopted in 2015, the SDGs represent a comprehensive, universal agenda comprising 17 goals and 169 targets aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all by 2030.¹⁹ While the SDGs reflect unprecedented consensus on global priorities, they also expose significant structural limitations in African societies, particularly concerning governance, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and inequality. According to the 2023 SDG Progress Report, sub-Saharan Africa is off-track in over 70% of the SDG targets, with widening disparities in income, gender equality, and access to education.²⁰

19 Ashida (n 1) 73; Maja Mihaljević Kosor, 'Sustainable Development Goals and Higher Education: An Efficiency Analysis' (2023) 69(3) *Naše gospodarstvo/Our Economy* 12, 13 <<https://doi.org/10.2478/ngoe-2023-0014>.

20 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Africa Sustainable Development Report 2023* (UNECA 2023) <<https://www.uneca.org>> accessed 10 December 2025.

From the tone and content of the SDGs, a specific role for universities is discernible and the achievement of these goals is deeply intertwined with the capacities and contributions of higher education institutions. Goal 4 of the SDGs, which calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, underscores the pivotal role that universities play in shaping the future of education systems worldwide.

Target 4.3 of SDG 4, which specifically seeks to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, is especially relevant to African universities. By providing inclusive access to tertiary education, universities are directly contributing to the realisation of this target, fostering both academic and professional opportunities for young people across the continent. In doing so, universities not only promote individual empowerment but also help build the knowledge and skills necessary for broader socio-economic transformation.

Moreover, the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) was established to support universities in integrating sustainability into their core functions, including curricula, research, and institutional operations. HESI partners with universities and other UN agencies to promote sustainability and to ensure that higher education institutions become key players in achieving the SDGs. This initiative underscores the growing recognition of the need for universities to integrate sustainable development practices into all their activities, making them essential to the global push towards sustainability.²¹

It must be noted, however, that while there are numerous studies on sustainability initiatives in universities in the Global North, as well as in some other parts of the developing world,²² studies on sustainability

21 Hoai Thi Mai Bui, Tung Bui and Binh Thai Pham, 'The Role of Higher Education in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: An Evaluation of Motivation and Capacity of Vietnamese Institutions' (2024) 22(3) *The International Journal of Management Education* 101088 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2024.101088>> accessed 10 December 2025.

22 See, for example, Diane White Husic, 'Reframing Sustainability Initiatives in Higher Education' (2024) 7(5) *Sustain Earth Reviews* <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s42055-024-00076-9>> accessed 10 December 2025; Prakash Shrestha, 'Sustainability Initiatives in

initiatives in African universities are relatively scarce. This gap presents a unique opportunity for exploring the peculiar importance, critical dimensions, principles, and challenges associated with sustainability initiatives in the African context.

3.2 Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want

Launched in 2013 as a 50-year continental blueprint, Agenda 2063 is Africa's strategic framework for socio-economic transformation.²³ Built on the ideals of Pan-Africanism, self-determination, and inclusive development, Agenda 2063 envisions 'an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena.'²⁴ Its flagship goals are the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA), the African Passport, the free movement of people, and the Pan-African E-University. It places a central emphasis on education, innovation, and knowledge economies as key drivers of growth.

In alignment with the SDGs, Agenda 2063 explicitly foregrounds the role of higher education and research institutions. Aspiration 1 of the agenda calls for well-educated citizens and a skills revolution underpinned by science, technology, and innovation. The Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want* document situates higher education, science, research, and innovation at the core of the continent's long-term transformative ambition. Although the document is primarily a broad development blueprint rather than a sectoral policy, it contains concrete provisions that articulate the roles expected of African universities and the broader higher education ecosystem.

A central theme of Agenda 2063 is the 'Education, Skills and Technology Revolution', where tertiary education is explicitly integrated into strategies for human capital development, innovation, industrialisation,

Higher Education Institutions: The Stakeholder Perspectives' (2025) 17(4) *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* 1394, 1395 <<https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-03-2024-0141>> accessed 10 December 2025.

²³ African Union Commission, Agenda 2063 (n 2) 132-135.

²⁴ Ibid.

and scientific research. The framework states that member states should ‘catalyse education and skills revolution and actively promote science, technology, research and innovation, to build knowledge, human capital, capabilities and skills to drive innovations and for the African century.’²⁵ This provision underscores the expectation that universities and related higher education institutions will not only train graduates but also produce original knowledge, expand scientific research capacity, and drive innovation to meet continental needs. The emphasis on science, technology, and research reflects an understanding that universities must contribute directly to Africa’s competitiveness and socio-economic transformation.

In its Indicative Strategies, Agenda 2063 goes further by naming specific targets related to the higher education sector. These include commitments to: (a) build research capacity of African universities and develop high-quality postgraduate programmes to promote research and original knowledge production; (b) promote the Pan-African University as a model of excellence and to establish a continent-wide network of centres of excellence; and (c) build world-class research laboratories in computer science, engineering, biosciences, technology, and innovation.²⁶

These strategies expressly locate universities at the forefront of Agenda 2063’s vision for a knowledge-driven Africa. By mandating the development of research capacity and graduate excellence, the framework elevates the role of universities beyond teaching and learning, fostering a broader range of academic pursuits. It positions them as innovators and hubs for scientific advancement.

Importantly, Agenda 2063 envisions a continent where ‘millions of Africans will have been trained, educated and skilled with special emphasis on science, technology, research and innovation, as well as vocational training in every sector.’²⁷ This projection further emphasises the

25 African Union Commission, Agenda 2063 (n 2) 30, 31 (on the role of education, skills, and technology revolution in promoting Agenda 2063).

26 African Union, Agenda 2063 (n 2) 160 (‘Indicative Strategies’).

27 African Union, Draft Lesson on *Agenda 2063* (‘the university sector and intelligentsia playing an instrumental role...millions will have been trained...’)

expectation that higher education institutions will produce skilled professionals who choose to remain on the continent and contribute to its development. Motala, Sayed and Maggott have posited that Agenda 2063 constitutes a veritable tool in the historical process of decolonising higher education in Africa.²⁸

Collectively, these references demonstrate that the SDGs and Agenda 2063 frame universities not simply as beneficiaries of global and regional development policy but as active drivers of Africa's transformation, responsible for generating knowledge, advancing innovation systems, cultivating highly skilled professionals, and anchoring research ecosystems that support the implementation of continental and national development agendas.

The need for quality education, a hallmark of SDG 4, is particularly germane for Africa, where access to higher education remains unequal and often limited by socio-economic barriers. By addressing these gaps, African universities can contribute to the continent's Agenda 2063, which envisions a future where higher education plays a fundamental role in socio-economic development, innovation, and the production of knowledge relevant to Africa's development needs.²⁹

However, realising these ambitions demands deep institutional reform, sustainable financing, and cross-sectoral collaboration, where African universities must become implementers and innovators. The underpinning argument here is that African universities, as central pillars of education

<https://africanunion2063.org/courses/agenda-2063-frame-work/lesson/draft-lesson-2/> accessed 10 December 2025.

28 Motala, Sayed and Maggott (n 5) 192.

29 Margarita Garfias Royo, Loan Diep, Joe Mulligan, Pascal Mukanga and Priti Parikh, 'Linking the UN Sustainable Development Goals and African Agenda 2063: Understanding Overlaps and Gaps Between the Global Goals and Continental Priorities for Africa' (2022) 1 *World Development Sustainability* 1, 2 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wds.2022.100010>> accessed 10 December 2025. See also Paula Gonçalves Serafini, Jéssica Morais de Moura, Mariana Rodrigues de Almeida, and Júlio Francisco Dantas de Rezende, 'Sustainable Development Goals in Higher Education Institutions: A Systematic Literature Review' (2022) 370 *Journal of Cleaner Production* 133473 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.133473>> accessed 10 December 2025.

and innovation, are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for sustainable development, both within the African continent and globally.

3.3 Misalignments, Missed Opportunities and Convergence

Despite the alignment in aspirations between the SDGs and Agenda 2063, African countries often struggle with implementing both frameworks simultaneously. Policy incoherence, fragmented governance, and donor-driven priorities contribute to the disjointed localisation of these agendas.³⁰ This confusion is mirrored in university systems, many of which remain isolated from national development planning processes. Without deliberate institutional engagement strategies, universities risk remaining peripheral actors.

Moreover, both SDGs and Agenda 2063 tend to treat higher education to an end (e.g. employability, innovation) rather than as a sector with agency and the capacity to contribute to development processes. There is a need to move beyond tokenistic inclusion of universities in consultations, towards an integrated model where higher education institutions are co-creators of development policies.

The convergence of global and continental agendas requires a localised, context-sensitive approach to implementation. This is where African universities can emerge as key institutional anchors. Their embeddedness in local environments, combined with access to global knowledge systems, uniquely positions them to interpret, adapt, and implement development frameworks in ways that resonate with community needs and national imperatives.³¹

30 Damtew Teferra, 'Higher Education and the SDGs in Africa: More of the Same?' (2020) 100 *International Higher Education* 15-17 <<https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ihe/article/view/14221>> (accessed 10 December 2025); Xolani Thusi, Victor H. Mlambo, Nkosingiphile Mkhize, 'Challenges of Implementing the Africa Agenda 2063: A Synopsis' (2024) 8(1) *Prizren Social Science Journal* 58, 59-63 <<https://www.ceeol.com/search/viewpdf?id=1292147>> accessed 10 December 2025.

31 Corrine Noël Knapp, Robin S. Reid, María E. Fernández-Giménez, Julia A. Klein and Kathleen A. Galvin, 'Placing Transdisciplinarity in Context: A Review of Approaches to Connect Scholars, Society and Action' (2019) 11(18) *Sustainability* 4899 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/su11184899>> accessed 10 December 2025. See also Lan Murdock and Rose Stephenson, 'Advancing Translational Research' (2024) 1(1) *Journal of*

The task ahead is not merely to ‘include’ universities, but to empower them to lead through research, policy engagement, community partnerships, and training. Agenda 2063 and the SDGs will remain aspirational until they are implemented through practical institutions that shape daily life. In this regard, African universities are not optional stakeholders but foundational partners in realising both frameworks.

4. AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: EXPANDING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The role of universities in the 21st century has undergone a significant transformation. Universities are no longer limited to their traditional triad of teaching, research, and community services. They are increasingly seen as key institutional actors capable of driving development, shaping public policy, and addressing systemic societal challenges. In the African context, this expanded role is desirable and imperative. The continent’s struggle with poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and institutional fragility necessitates reimagining universities as engines of transformation and innovation.

4.1 From Ivory Tower to Civic Anchor

Historically, as acknowledged by several writers, many African universities were modelled after Euro-American academic traditions, focusing on elite education and theoretical research, which often conflicted with local realities.³² This ‘ivory tower’ orientation created a gap

Translational Research 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/29947448.2024.2432753>> accessed 10 December 2025.

32 Birgit Brock-Utne, ‘African Universities and the African Heritage’ (1999) 45(1) *International Review of Education/Internationale Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft* 87, 89-93 <<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003577905270>> accessed 10 December 2025; Damtew Teferra and Philip G. Altbachl, ‘African higher education: Challenges for the 21st century’ (2004) 47 *Higher Education* 21, 23-24 <<https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HIGH.0000009822.49980.30>> accessed 10 December 2025; Carlos Cardoso, ‘The Challenges Facing African Universities’ (2020) 32(3) *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 302, 305-310 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2019.1671812>> accessed 10 December 2025. See also Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘The Emergence and

between academia and society. However, contemporary development paradigms emphasise the importance of inclusive institutions that are responsive to the needs of their communities.

Universities are increasingly being viewed as ‘anchor institutions’ – entities that remain rooted in place and possess the potential to influence social and economic well-being through education, employment, innovation, and civic engagement.³³ In their summation of the numerous theoretical approaches to this subject, Chankseliani and McCowan posited that:

[H]igher education is far more than a tool to acquire skills, knowledge, and credentials. Universities allow individuals to pursue freedoms that they value and that they have rights to pursue, and to develop their agency freedom, irrespective of social class, ethnicity and gender, leading ultimately to holistic human development.³⁴

In Africa, where other forms of institutional infrastructure may be weak or non-existent, universities are uniquely positioned to fill governance gaps and foster local development.

One of the defining features of the 21st century is the knowledge economy, an economy based on the production, distribution, and use of knowledge and information. In such an economy, universities are indispensable. They

Trajectories of Struggles for an “African University”: The Case of Unfinished Business of African Epistemic Decolonisation’ (2017) 43 *Kronos* 51, 55-61 <<https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2017/v43a4>> accessed 10 December 2025.

33 Eric Fredua-Kwarteng, ‘Africa: The Case for Developmental Universities’ in Georgiana Mihut, Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit (eds), *Understanding Global Higher Education. Global Perspectives on Higher Education* (SensePublishers 2017) 193, 195 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6351-044-8_42> accessed 10 December 2025; Liam O’Farrell, Sara Hassan and Charlotte Hoole, ‘The University As A Just Anchor: Universities, Anchor Networks and Participatory Research’ (2022) 47(12) *Studies in Higher Education* 2405, 2406-2407 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2072480>> accessed 10 December 2025.

34 Maia Chankseliani and Tristan McCowan, ‘Higher Education and the Sustainable Development Goals’ (2021) 81 *Higher Education* 1, 3 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00652-w>> accessed 10 December 2025.

generate research, cultivate human capital, and nurture innovative ecosystems.³⁵

For African countries to compete globally and address local development needs, universities must produce graduates and stimulate indigenous research and innovation. The potential for university-led innovation has been evident in such areas as agriculture, climate, renewable energy, public health, information technology, and more.³⁶

Another expanding responsibility of universities lies in capacity development. Governments, civil society, and the private sector require skilled personnel, yet the skills gap across Africa remains profound. The incidence of many African university graduates not being able to access employment opportunities due to the mismatch between certification and industry needs is well-documented.³⁷

African universities are key to addressing this challenge by providing technical skills, critical thinking, civic education, and leadership training. They can close the gap between education and employability by aligning with national development goals and labour market needs, contributing to economic resilience.

African universities also have an increasingly prominent role in shaping public policy. Through policy-relevant research, the production of evidence, and participation in public discourse, universities can influence

35 Mammo Muchie, Angathevar Baskaran and Mingfeng Tang, 'Introduction: China–Africa Science, Technology, Innovation Collaboration for Their Win–Win Enduring Shared Future Relations' in Mammo Muchie, Angathevar Baskaran and Mingfeng Tang (eds), *China–Africa Science, Technology, Innovation Collaboration for Their Win–Win Enduring Shared Future Relations* (Springer Nature 2024) 1, 3–4 <https://doi.org/1007/978-981-97-4576-0_1> accessed 10 December 2025.

36 Olalekan John Okesanya, Olaniyi Abideen Adigun, Deborah Oluwaseun Shomuyiwa, et al, 'Introducing African-Led Innovation to Tackle the Challenges of Climate Change in Africa' (2024) 13 *Pan African Medical Journal One Health* 1, 3–5 <<https://doi.org/10.11604/pamj-oh.2024.13.2.41492>> accessed 10 December 2025.

37 John Michael Etoru, Benson Turyasingura, Fredrick Kayusi, Linety Juma, Rashmi Mishra and Rubén González Vallejo, 'Transforming Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Overcoming 21st-Century Challenges with Practical Remedies' (2025) 4(2) *Región Científica* 2025493 <<https://doi.org/10.58763/rc2025493>> accessed 10 December 2025.

the design and implementation of development strategies. However, this role is underdeveloped in many African countries due to poor governance-academic collaboration, lack of incentives, and limited institutional frameworks for engagement.³⁸

To fulfil their development potential, African universities must move beyond publication metrics and focus on producing rigorous and actionable knowledge. This includes policy briefs, community reports, stakeholder dialogues, and translation of research into practice.

The 21st-century African university must also be a site for nurturing ethical leadership and fostering social cohesion. Africa's development challenges are not only technical but also moral and political. Corruption, conflict, and weak institutions undermine progress. African universities, through civic education, democratic values, and inclusive campus cultures, can cultivate a new generation of ethical leaders and active citizens.

Moreover, universities can function as spaces for intercultural dialogue, reconciliation, and peacebuilding in multi-ethnic and post-conflict societies. They are among the few public institutions that unite people from different regions, backgrounds, and identities, making them critical arenas for shaping collective identities and national unity.³⁹

4.2 Community Engagement and the Localisation of Development Agendas

The concept of “community engagement” has emerged as a strategic framework for enhancing the developmental impact of universities. For African universities to contribute meaningfully to the SDGs and Agenda

38 John Michael Etoru and Tajudeen Sanni Adebayo, ‘The Role of the African University in the Continent’s Development’ (2025) 6(2) *International Journal of Research in Education, Humanities and Commerce* 31, 33 <<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2025.6204>> accessed 10 December 2025.

39 Scherto Gill, ‘Universities as Spaces for Engaging the Other: A Pedagogy of Encounter for Intercultural and Interreligious Education’ (2016) 62 *International Review of Education* 490-492 483-500 10.1007/s11159-016-9572-7> ; BJ Johnson and M Hlatshwayo, ‘Anchor Universities and Communities: The Power of Community Engagement’ (2025) 39(1) *South African Journal of Higher Education* 114, 118-122, describing universities as microcosm of the ‘polycrisis’ in society as well as critical actors in responding to the polycrisis.

2063, their work must be deeply rooted in the lived realities of the communities they serve. Localising global and continental development agendas requires context-specific knowledge, inclusive partnerships and long-term engagement with stakeholders at all levels. Community engagement offers a viable pathway for this localisation process.

Community engagement in higher education refers to the collaboration between universities and external communities, both rural and urban, in mutually beneficial and socially impactful ways.⁴⁰ Values of reciprocity, co-production of knowledge, inclusivity, and social justice underpin it. For African universities, community engagement goes beyond outreach or volunteerism; it is about integrating local perspectives into the institutions' teaching, research, and service missions.

In practice, this can take many forms: participatory action research with smallholder farmers, public health initiatives in informal settlements, legal aid clinics in underserved regions, or policy dialogues with civil society organisations. What distinguishes genuine engagement is that communities are not merely recipients of knowledge or services but partners in project design, implementation, and evolution.

Despite its importance, however, community engagement is often treated as peripheral within African universities, receiving less institutional support than teaching or research. It must be formally integrated into institutional strategies, governance structures, and academic programmes to centralise engagement with university operations.⁴¹ This includes establishing community engagement offices, allocating budgetary resources, incentivising engaged scholarship, and including engagement metrics in staff evaluations.

Additionally, engagement should be embedded into curricula through service learning, internships, and field-based education. Students should be trained to acquire knowledge and apply it ethically and effectively in

40 Margie Maistry, 'Higher Education Community Engagement' (2023) 1(1) *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement* i-ii.

41 African Union Commission, *Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25)* (AU 2016). See Tikly (n 10) 225, 231, for a critique of the CESA.

real-world settings. Academic departments should collaborate across disciplines to address complex development issues holistically.

The SDGs and Agenda 2063 are often criticised for their top-down, technocratic language. Translating these global and continental ambitions into local action requires deep contextualisation. African universities can play a catalytic role in this process by interpreting the goal in light of local needs, priorities, and capacities.⁴² For example, while SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education, African universities can work with local school systems, teacher training colleges, and parent-teacher associations to identify culturally appropriate and context-specific strategies for improving education outcomes. Similarly, Agenda 2063's aspiration around health, economic diversification, and gender equality can be localised through community-based research and innovation led by universities.

4.3 Case Studies: African Universities in Action

To illustrate how African universities are actively contributing to the localisation of global and continental development agendas, this section presents a selection of case studies. These examples show how institutions integrate teaching, research, community engagement, and policy advocacy to address real-world challenges. While not exhaustive, they provide valuable insights and models of university-led development that are context-specific, innovative, and scalable.

4.3.1 University of Cape Town (South Africa): Advancing Social Justice through Public Policy

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is today widely recognised for its leadership in combining academic rigour with social responsiveness. Its Poverty and Inequality Initiative bring together researchers, civil society organisations, and government actors to address structural inequality in

42 Nhamo (n 3) 65-66; Nhamo and Chapungu (n 4) para 4; Nhamo, Chapungu and Dube (n 4) 5; Motala, Sayed and Maggott (n 5) 196; United Nations Development Programme, *Localising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UNDP 2017).

South Africa, an issue central to both the SDGs and Agenda 2063.⁴³ The university's African Centre for Cities has also played a pivotal role in shaping urban development policies across the continent, particularly concerning SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

UCT's approach demonstrates how universities can function as knowledge nodes, generating interdisciplinary research that informs public discourse and contributes to policy reforms. Moreover, its commitment to decolonising curricula and supporting student activism highlights the university's evolving role as a civic institution grounded in the socio-political realities of Africa.⁴⁴

4.3.2 Makerere University (Uganda): Health and Community-Based Education

Makerere University's School of Public Health has developed a model for Community-Based Education, Research, and Service (COBERS), which deploys medical students to rural health centres across Uganda.⁴⁵ This model integrates service learning with hands-on training and addresses local health disparities by strengthening frontline healthcare provision. COBERS has successfully improved health outcomes and influenced national health policy through the data and insights gathered from rural

43 University of Cape Town Poverty and Inequality Initiative, 'Overview' <<https://www.povertyandinequality.uct.ac.za>> accessed 10 December 2025.

44 Ibid.

45 Makerere University School of Public Health, 'COBERS Programme' <<https://chs.mak.ac.ug/page/community-based-education-research-and-services-cobers>> accessed 10 December 2025. For further exposition on this case study, see Abbas Kisambira, Babirye Khadijah and Aniku Ahmed, 'The Role of University Community Engagement Programs in Influencing Higher Education Outcomes and Community Development: An Insight from Uganda' (2024) 4(1) *Extensive Reviews* 15-28 <<https://doi.org/10.21467/exr.4.1.8028>> accessed 10 December 2025; Dorothy Irene Nalweyiso, Johnson Mbabazi, Joseph Kabanda, Jeff Breckon, Lawrence Achilles Nyanzi, Michael Grace Kawooya, Aloysius Gonzaga Mubuuke, Josette Bettany Saltikov and Katherine Sanderson, 'Barriers and Facilitators of Evidence-Based Practice among Lecturers at Makerere University College of Health Sciences, Uganda: A Qualitative Study' (2024) 11(1) *Cogent Education* <<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2407185>> accessed 10 December 2025.

engagements.⁴⁶ This example demonstrates the effectiveness of applied learning and community-engaged research in simultaneously training professionals and delivering services that advance SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being).

4.3.3 University of Ibadan (Nigeria): Research for Policy and Environmental Sustainability

At the University of Ibadan, the Centre for Sustainable Development (CESDEV) works closely with local governments and CSOs to advance environmental education, community sensitisation and research translation. One of the key projects focuses on climate resilience and sustainable agriculture in rural communities, aligning with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and Agenda 2063's emphasis on environmentally sustainable growth.⁴⁷

CESDEV also collaborates with the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) to facilitate workshops on localising the SDGs. The university's research outputs are often converted into policy briefs and shared with relevant ministries, providing a model for mainstreaming knowledge translation in university operations.⁴⁸

4.3.4 Kenyatta University (Kenya): Technological Innovation and Entrepreneurship

The Kenyatta University has become a hub for technological innovation and entrepreneurship, partly driven by its close ties to the Chandaria Centre for Innovation, one of Kenya's most prominent technological

46 Makerere University School of Public Health, 'COBERS Programme' <<https://chs.mak.ac.ug/page/community-based-education-research-and-services-cobers>> accessed 10 December 2025.

47 University of Ibadan Centre for Sustainable Development, 'Projects and Initiatives' <<https://www.cesdev.ui.edu.ng>> accessed 10 December 2025; University of Ibadan Research Foundation, 'About the Foundation' <<https://www.research.ui.edu.ng>> accessed 10 December 2025.

48 AUDA-NEPAD, 'Support to Higher Education and Skills Development in Africa' <<https://www.nepad.org>> accessed 10 December 2025.

incubators.⁴⁹ The University has supported dozens of start-ups working on mobile health, digital finance, and agricultural technologies through its science and engineering facilities, which are crucial to inclusive development.

These initiatives demonstrate how universities can contribute to Africa's digital transformation, a key pillar of Agenda 2063 and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). The Kenyatta University has also integrated innovation and entrepreneurship into curricula, encouraging students to develop prototypes, business plans, and market-driven solutions as part of their academic journey.⁵⁰

4.3.5 University of Ghana ((Ghana): Policy Dialogue and Social Development

The University of Ghana's Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) is one of the leading think-tanks on the continent. ISSER conducts high-impact, policy-relevant research in poverty, employment, gender equity, and fiscal policy.⁵¹ Policymakers and international agencies cite the annual State of the Ghanaian Economy Report.

ISSER exemplifies how African universities can serve as policy laboratories, where evidence-based recommendations are generated, tested, and disseminated. The institute has become a bridge between academic research and public decision-making by maintaining close relationships with ministries, parliamentary committees, and civil society groups.⁵²

49 Pascal Nyiringango, 'High-Quality Education and Research Collaboration Play a Key Role in the Success of

University-Integrated Hubs: Case Study of Kenyatta University – Chandaria Centre for Innovation' (2024) 10(1) *Journal of Education and Practice* 46, 51 <<https://doi.org/10.47604/ajep.2304>> accessed 10 December 2025.

50 Ibid, 52.

51 University of Ghana Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), 'Research and Reports' <<https://isser.ug.edu.gh>> accessed 10 December 2025.

52 Ibid.

The case studies yield several key insights into the conditions under which universities can meaningfully contribute to development outcomes. Institutions that actively embed themselves within local and national systems, whether through strategic partnerships, sustained community engagement, or broader public outreach, demonstrate a greater capacity to influence social and economic development. Their integration into these systems allows for more responsive and contextually grounded research initiatives.

Furthermore, cross-sector collaboration emerges as a critical factor in enhancing both the relevance and impact of academic work. Engagements with government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and industry stakeholders enable universities to align their research agendas with world challenges, thereby increasing the likelihood of tangible societal benefits.

A notable pattern across the most effective programmes is the consistent application of interdisciplinary approaches. Programmes that draw upon diverse fields, such as medicine, engineering, the social sciences, and environmental studies, tend to produce more holistic and impactful solutions, addressing complex problems through multiple lenses.

Finally, the sustainability of impact depends not solely on the production of high-quality research but also on the presence of enabling institutional conditions. These include strong leadership, dedicated funding mechanisms, and a clear institutional commitment to development-oriented scholarship. Without these structural supports, even the most promising research initiatives risk remaining fragmented or short-lived.

5. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN REPOSITIONING AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

As African universities seek to align their institutional missions with national and continental development goals, one of the most critical but underutilised avenues for impact is knowledge translation, the process through which academic research is transformed into practical applications, policies, and innovations that address societal challenges. In

the context of Africa's pursuit of the SDGs and Agenda 2063, the ability of universities to act as mediators between evidence and action is central to their developmental mandate.

Knowledge translation refers to the dynamic, iterative process through which knowledge is synthesised, communicated, exchanged, and applied in ways that strengthen decision-making, improve development outcomes, and support socio-economic progress.⁵³ Although the term originated in the health sciences, it has broadened into a cross-disciplinary concept used widely in education, governance, and international development. At its core, knowledge translation is concerned with ensuring that research does not remain confined to academic spaces but is mobilised to inform real-world action.⁵⁴

Within African universities, knowledge translation involves making research accessible and usable for non-academic stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organisations, community leaders, practitioners, and the private sector. This requires not only the production of rigorous evidence but also the development of communication pathways that allow diverse audiences to understand, engage with, and apply research outputs. Knowledge translation, therefore, is about making research matter in public life and ensuring that universities contribute directly to developmental problem-solving.⁵⁵

53 Sarah Evans and Harry Scarbrough, 'Supporting Knowledge Translation Through Collaborative Translational Research Initiatives: 'Bridging' Versus 'Blurring' Boundary-Spanning Approaches in the UK CLAHRC Initiative' (2014) 106 *Social Science and Medicine* 119, 120 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.01.025>> accessed 10 December 2025; Majid Wajdi and Ni Ketut Suciani, 'Introduction to Translation: Definition, Scope, and Importance' (2025) 3(3) *Mawamedia Jayamusta Buanasiha* 1-2 <<https://ojs.ptmjb.org/index.php/PTMJJB/article/view/43>> accessed 10 December 2025.

54 Wajdi and Suciani (n 53) *ibid*; Chux Daniels and Christiane Gebhardt, 'Higher Education, Science and Research Systems for Transformative Change in Africa – What Role for Innovation Policy?' (2021) 35(5) *Industry and Higher Education* 553, 555 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/09504222211029901>> accessed 10 December 2025.

55 Daniels and Gebhardt (n 54) *ibid*; Knapp, Reid, Fernández-Giménez, Klein and Galvin (n 31) *ibid*.

To locate this within the current discourse, this paper reflects on some of the challenges and opportunities in repositioning African universities as anchors of sustainable development agendas. The approach helps in framing the strategic recommendations on the way forward.

5.1 Structural and Institutional Challenges

Despite substantial research activity across African higher education institutions, much of this work fails to influence policy or practice, and the transformative potential of community engagement faces several barriers. These include limited funding, a rigid academic reward system, insufficient training in participatory methods, and mistrust between universities and communities.

Numerous studies have identified several key barriers contributing to this persistent disconnect. First and perhaps most pronounced is the twin challenge of underfunding and resource constraints. Academic incentive structures often reward publication in high-impact international journals rather than locally relevant research, engagement, or policy advocacy. This narrows the orientation of scholarship and discourages efforts to translate findings for practical use.⁵⁶ Related to this is chronic underfunding which remains one of the most persistent challenges facing African universities. Public universities across the continent frequently operate under financial strain, with outdated infrastructure, inadequate research funding, and insufficient faculty remuneration.⁵⁷ External donors often fund critical

56 Alphonsus Neba and Luchuo Engelbert Bain, 'The Perilous Path: Reimagining Promotion and Tenure in African Academia' (2024) 49(5) *Pan African Medical Journal* 1, 4-5 <<https://doi.org/10.11604/pamj.2024.49.5.44855>> accessed 10 December 2025; Ian Bunting, Nico Cloete, Henri Li Kam Wah and Florence Nakayiwa-Mayega, 'Assessing the Performance of African Flagship Universities' in Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracy Bailey (eds), *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education* (African Minds 2015) 32, 33-36; Nico Cloete, Tracy Bailey, Pundy Pillay, Ian Bunting and Peter Maassen, *Universities and Economic Development in Africa* (CHET 2011) 36.

57 Motala, Sayed and Maggott (n 5) 198. See also Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR), Think Tank-University Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa. A Synthesis Report on 10 Country Studies, Working Paper 014, March 2016 <https://www.pasgr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Synthesis-Paper_Think-Tank-University-Relations-in-Sub-Saharan-Africa_Final.pdf> accessed 10 December 2025.

projects, resulting in dependency and misalignment between institutional priorities and local needs.

Complicating this scenario are the twin phenomena of brain drain and faculty shortages. High levels of emigration among African academics and professionals continue to undermine institutional capacity. Talented scholars are often drawn to more favourable research environments in the Global North, leaving behind understaffed departments and gaps in specialised knowledge areas critical to development, such as data science, environmental engineering, and health systems research.⁵⁸

Furthermore, limited communication channels within universities result in few mechanisms for producing policy briefs, media outputs, or community-friendly materials, leaving research in formats that are inaccessible to non-academic audiences.⁵⁹ Third, weak research-policy linkages mean that government ministries and public agencies frequently lack systematic processes for integrating academic evidence into policymaking. At the same time, many researchers have a limited understanding of policy cycles or lack access to policymakers, further widening the gap between knowledge production and policy uptake.⁶⁰ Moreover, some universities lack the institutional autonomy or vision to prioritise engagement over more traditional academic pursuits.⁶¹

In many African countries, universities operate within highly centralised systems where ministries tightly control budgets, appointments, and curricula. This limits institutional agility and the ability to design development-responsive or initiate strategic partnerships.⁶² Moreover,

58 Etoru and Adebayo (n 38) 41; Monicah Rullonga Kanyesigye, 'Rethinking Brain Drain in Africa: Factors Driving the Exodus of the Highly Educated and the Role of Higher Education in Reversing the Trend' (2025) *Migration and Development* 1, 3, 12 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/21632324251352312>> accessed 10 December 2025.

59 Tikly (n 10) 228-229.

60 Etoru and Adebayo (n 38) 34; Emmanuel Botlhale, *Bridging the Research-Policy Divide to Spur Development in Africa During the SDGs Era* (Routledge 2025) 9-11.

61 Teklu Abate Bekele and Denis Thaddeus Ofoyuru, 'Emerging University-Society Engagements in Africa: An Analysis of Strategic Plans' (2021) 13(1) *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education* 151, 156, 165.

62 Tracy Bailey, 'The Roles of National Councils and Commissions in African Higher Education System Governance' in Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracy Bailey (eds),

polymaking is frequently divorced from academia, with little formalised engagement between universities and government planning agencies.

Related to this are political and government risks. Universities often function within politically unstable or authoritarian contexts, where academic freedom is curtailed. In such environments, universities may hesitate to speak truth to power or advocate for evidence-based reforms that challenge dominant narratives.⁶³ This inhibits the university's critical and civic functions, reducing it to a technocratic training centre rather than a space for democratic engagement and social transformation.

Mention must also be made of the pervasive fragmentation and compartmentalised academic cultures in African universities – a silo structure of faculties and departments, which impedes interdisciplinary collaboration, a necessity for addressing complex development challenges. Research, teaching, and community engagement are often compartmentalised, limiting collaborations and reducing the practical impact of academic work.⁶⁴

Collectively, these barriers hinder the developmental impact of African scholarship and underscore the need for structural reforms that foster communication, partnership, and engagement as core academic functions.

To overcome these challenges, universities must adopt a long-term perspective, focusing on building trust, co-creating knowledge, and

Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education (African Minds 2015) 171, 174.

63 Antoinette Yaa Benewaa Gabrah, George Kofi Amoako and George Oppong Appiagyei Ampong, 'Africa's Response to SDGs: Barriers and Challenges' in Samuel Adomako, Albert Danso and Agyenim Boateng (eds) *Corporate Sustainability in Africa: Responsible Leadership, Opportunities, and Challenges* (Palgrave Macmillan 2023) 47, 49-50; Thusi, Mlambo and Mkhize (n 30) *ibid*.

64 Patrick Mbongwa Mhlongo, 'Breaking Silos to Foster Knowledge Sharing in Universities: A Systems Thinking Perspective' (2025) 26(1) *European Conference on Knowledge Management* 644, 645 <<https://www.proquest.com/conference-papers-proceedings/breaking-silos-foster-knowledge-sharing/docview/3271163613/se-2>> accessed 10 December 2025; Nico Cloete and Peter Maassen, 'Roles of Universities and the African Context' in Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracy Bailey (eds), *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education* (African Minds 2015) 1, 12.

ensuring accountability to academic and community partners. Policymakers must also recognise and support the civic role of universities through targeted funding, policy incentives, and a supportive regulatory environment.

While African universities possess enormous potential to serve as catalysts for sustainable development, several entrenched challenges limit their capacity to lead or even meaningfully participate in localising global and continental development agendas. Repositioning universities to play this transformative role requires an honest appraisal of systemic barriers and identifying strategic opportunities for reform and innovation.

5.2 Opportunities for Transformative Change

Despite these barriers, several promising opportunities exist for repositioning African universities as active agents in development. An attempt is made here to highlight some of the potentials.

First is the demographic dividend from Africa's burgeoning population. Africa's youthful population presents both challenges and opportunities. With over 60% of its population under 25, the continent has a unique window to invest in human capital through higher education.⁶⁵ Universities that align programmes with labour market demands, technological skills, and entrepreneurship will be central to unlocking this dividend.

65 Lawrence Adu Asamoah, 'Harnessing Africa's Demographic Dividend: Opportunities and Emerging Challenges for Economic Transformation' (ACET 2025) <<https://acetforafrica.org/research-and-analysis/insights-ideas/policy-briefs/harnessing-africas-demographic-dividend/#:~:text=This%20demographic%20momentum%20presents%20a,fertility%20and%20growing%20elderly%20populations>> accessed 10 December 2025; International Labour Organisation (ILO), *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024 Sub-Saharan Africa* (ILO 2024) 3-4 <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024_0.pdf> accessed 10 December 2025; Mphatso Jones Boti Phiri, 'Addressing Youth Unemployment in Africa' in Dan Kuwali (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sustainable Peace and Security in Africa* (Springer 2022) 433, 435-436.

Second is the digital transformation of the African society. The continental initiative to expand digital infrastructure across Africa opens new frontiers for higher education.⁶⁶ If properly harnessed with the goals and objectives of the SDGs and Agenda 2063, virtual learning, digital research tools, online knowledge sharing, and cross-border collaboration can help overcome historical limitations related to distance, cost, and access. Institutions that embrace digital transformation can become hubs of regional knowledge production and dissemination.

Third is pan-African networks and collaborations. Initiatives such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), the Association of African Universities (AAU), and the Pan-African University provide regional integration, capacity-building, and policy-influence platforms.⁶⁷ These networks facilitate resource pooling, shared infrastructure, and collaborative research across national boundaries, which is key for tackling continental challenges.

Furthermore, public-private partnerships (PPPs) and diversified funding present another potential. Reforms in governance and financing models offer potential for sustainable resourcing. Public-private partnerships, innovation hubs, alumni endowments, and philanthropic support can diversify funding streams and reduce overreliance on state allocation or foreign aid.⁶⁸ In particular, industry partnerships can foster applied research and ensure academic programmes align with economic needs.

A final dimension relates to emerging models of engaged scholarship. Across the continent, there is growing interest in participatory, community-based, and problem-oriented models of scholarship.⁶⁹

66 African Union Commission, *Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030)* (AU 2020) 2 <<https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38507-doc-dts-english.pdf>> accessed 10 December 2025.

67 African Research Universities Alliance, ‘Our Work’ <<https://arua.org.za>> accessed 10 December 2025.

68 Muchie, Baskaran and Tang (n 35) *ibid*.

69 Lombuso Precious Shabalala and Sisa Ngcwangu, ‘Accelerating the Implementation of SDG 4: Stakeholder Perceptions Towards Initiation of Sustainable Community Engagement Projects by Higher Education Institutions’ (2021) 22(7) *International Journal of*

Universities can draw inspiration from successful plots and institutionalise engagement as a core academic practice. Recognition of engaged scholarships in promotions, funding, and awards can further incentivise this drive.

5.3 Policy and Strategic Recommendations

As this paper has argued, African universities hold transformative potential as development agents capable of localising global and continental agendas such as the SDGs and Agenda 2063. However, systemic change is necessary to fully realise this potential within universities, national policy frameworks, and regional governance structures. This section proffers some strategic and policy recommendations that reaffirm the central thesis of this paper: African universities must be repositioned as civic, intellectual, and developmental hubs to achieve long-term sustainability.

First, African universities should explicitly integrate development-oriented goals into their mission statements, curricula, and research priorities. This includes establishing sustainable development offices or centres coordinating cross-cutting initiatives and aligning university operations with national and continental development plans. Curricula reform is crucial to closing the skills gap. Programmes must reflect labour market needs and promote interdisciplinary approaches to real-world problems. Soft skills, civic responsibility, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial thinking should become pillars of African higher education.

Furthermore, African universities must institutionalise knowledge translation practices to address research and policy implementation gaps. This process involves several interrelated strategies that can enhance the relevance and impact of academic research on policymaking. First, universities should establish dedicated Knowledge Translation Offices or Units. These entities would function as crucial intermediaries, tasked with

synthesising and reformatting scholarly findings into accessible, policy-relevant outputs for decision-makers and the broader public.

In addition, it is essential to equip academics with the necessary skills to communicate their research effectively within policy contexts. Training in areas such as storytelling, data visualisation, and policy-oriented writing can significantly enhance researchers' ability to present complex findings in compelling and actionable ways.

The prioritisation of digital transformation will be crucial as technology can expand access, reduce costs, and open new channels for engagement. Universities should adopt digital learning platforms, invest in data systems, and use AI analytics to inform institutional planning and development interventions.

Equally important is policymakers' early and sustained engagement in the research process. Collaborative approaches that involve co-designing studies with relevant stakeholders ensure that research questions are grounded in practical concerns, thereby increasing the likelihood that findings will be effectively translated into policy and practice. Through these coordinated efforts, African universities can enhance their role in shaping evidence-informed policy and making meaningful contributions to societal development.⁷⁰

An example of the suggestions here is the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), which works with African universities to build capacity in evidence-informed policymaking across the region.⁷¹ Similarly, universities such as the University of Ghana and the University of Cape Town have developed dedicated programmes and platforms for public policy engagement and knowledge dissemination.

Next, beyond influencing policy, African universities can play a catalytic role in innovation systems, for example, in the networks of institutions,

70 AFIDEP, 'Promoting Evidence-Informed Decision-Making in Africa' <<https://www.afidep.org>> accessed 10 December 2025.

71 Ibid.

firms, and individuals involved in creating, diffusing, and applying new knowledge and technologies. Innovation is crucial to addressing Africa's challenges in agriculture, health, energy, and education.

To achieve this effectively, universities must transcend the confines of basic research and position themselves as active contributors to applied research, technology transfer, and entrepreneurial initiatives. This transformation necessitates the cultivation of dynamic linkages with key societal sectors. Engagement with industry is crucial, particularly through the establishment of incubators, technology hubs, and robust industry-university partnerships that facilitate the commercialization of research and the co-creation of innovations.

Similarly, collaboration with government bodies is essential in shaping and implementing policy frameworks that align research priorities with national development goals. Such partnerships enable universities to contribute to policy discourse while benefiting from supportive and funding environments. In this regard, African universities should be seen, and should see themselves, as part of the development architecture. National development plans should formally include universities in implementation frameworks, and institutional strategies must be reciprocally aligned with public development goals.

Related to this is the need to strengthen regional collaboration and encourage multisectoral partnerships, as continental frameworks such as the AFCFTA and Agenda 2063 create opportunities for higher education integration. African universities should actively participate in regional research clusters, student exchange programmes, and innovation networks that transcend national boundaries. African universities should pursue strategic partnerships with industry, governance, and civil society to co-found initiatives. Such alliances can support applied research, improve relevance, and generate new revenue streams through consultancy, training, and commercialisation.

Equally important is the engagement of local communities through inclusive innovation processes. These processes must value and integrate indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that research and innovation are

contextually relevant and socially responsive. By forging strong, reciprocal relationships with industry, government, and communities, universities can become pivotal actors in national innovation systems and drivers of sustainable development. Community engagement must be recognised not as a peripheral activity but as an essential component of academic life. Service learning, community-based research, and local innovation labs should be embedded across departments. Academic promotions should reflect contributions to community impact as much as to scholarly publications.

In this regard, African universities should establish metrics and benchmarks for assessing their impact. Assessment frameworks must move beyond traditional academic indicators to include impact metrics such as community reach, policy influence, innovation uptake, and progress on SDG targets and indicators. Transparent reporting on these metrics can drive accountability and attract funding.

Finally, African universities should see themselves as knowledge brokers, organisations that bring together different knowledge producers and users to co-create, share, and apply evidence. In fragmented policy environments, universities can act as neutral conveners that bridge civil society, the private sector, and the state. This brokering role is vital in climate adaptation, public health, conflict resolution, and governance, where interdisciplinary knowledge and multi-stakeholder collaboration are essential.⁷²

The transformative change contemplated in this paper ultimately hinges on leadership, both institutional and political. Vice chancellors, deans, and department heads must champion the development mission of their universities, creating cultures that value relevance, innovation, and impact. National governments must therefore establish enabling policies that grant universities autonomy, reward performance, and institutionalise engagement in the national planning process.

72 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Building Innovation Systems for Sustainable Development in Africa* (UNECA 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that African universities are strategically positioned, yet insufficiently mobilised, as catalysts for sustainable development through the localisation of global and continental agendas. In the face of uneven progress on the SDGs and growing uncertainty about Africa's development trajectory beyond 2030, the analysis calls for a fundamental rethinking of the place of universities within development ecosystems.

Drawing on the SDGs, Agenda 2063, and contemporary scholarship, the paper demonstrates that higher education institutions already possess the core capacities on which these frameworks depend: knowledge production, human capital development, research, and innovation. The challenge lies not in mandate, but in alignment. Localisation emerges as an institutional and political process that requires leadership, contextual interpretation, and sustained engagement across policy, community, and innovation systems.

The paper further identifies knowledge translation as the critical mechanism linking university research to policy and practice. Evidence from African cases suggests that when institutional platforms, incentives, and partnerships are in place, universities can significantly influence development outcomes; however, when these elements are absent, the impact of research remains marginal. These findings reinforce the central argument that sustainable development cannot be delivered by governments or communities acting alone, and that universities must be embedded as active partners in governance and social transformation.

Far from being an *ex-cathedra* pronouncement on all the dynamics that should inform the repositioning of African universities for national, regional, and continental development, this paper would have served its purpose if it stimulates further discourses on the integration of universities into the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of the SDGs and Agenda 2063 and how these can be translated into enduring local outcomes.