

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An African philosophical perspective on barriers to the current discourse on sustainability

Martin Odei Ajei 

Department of Philosophy and Classics, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

Correspondence

Martin Odei Ajei, Department of Philosophy and Classics, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana.

Email: odeiajei@gmail.com, majei@ug.edu.gh

Since the publication of the Report of the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, the idea that the “triple bottom line” can cohere harmoniously to yield progressive rates of GDP growth, and a sustainable stock and welfare of the resources of Earth’s ecosystems has been rigorously challenged.¹ These challenges have triggered theoretical refinements of the assumptions and conclusions of *Our Common Future* and strategies for the achievement of sustainability. My paper wonders whether the dominant traits of such refinements and strategies have succeeded in discarding the burdens of the triple bottom line and defends two theses; that the notion of “sustainable development” as deployed in Western developmental ethics is potentially incoherent in that it is premised on the pursuit of conflicting goals, viz., economic growth and environmental protection; and that when deployed in the African context in particular, the concept has little practical purchase given its lack of engagement with indigenous values conceptions. Consequently, I propose some African normative perspectives as viable basis for further refinement of the conceptual toolkits of sustainability into a notion that has broader global resonance and uptake.

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE CONUNDRUM OF SUSTAINABILITY

This paper has critical and constructive aims. It critically examines inherently problematic vision of the idea of “sustainable development” as defined in *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987). I then establish a linkage between this idea and the problematic practice of development in Africa, and argue that this vision can scarcely yield a workable solution of development for Africa without local conceptual inputs. Accordingly, I introduce African normative perspectives on what sustainable development ought to look like, and propose these as viable bases for further refinement of the conceptual toolkits of sustainability into a notion that has broader global resonance.

But before I proceed to the problematic nature of the concept, let me state my understanding of what a concept of development is. I understand it as normative guides to the continual enhancement of a society's ability to preserve and improve human life, dignity and welfare and their conditions. Hence the values, principles and the lived realities in the social context of an object of development should be pivotal resources for formulating meaningful visions of development. In the light of this understanding, the definition of sustainable development in *Our Common Future* as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987) raises questions of conceptual value for Africa, even though it has become the touchstone of strategies for sustainability: it has driven all UN strategies for global progress subsequent to it,² and exerted influence on IMF and WB programs of support to the developing world and on continental development frameworks such as NEPAD and Agenda 2063.

The definition above assumes a universally validated conception of development (WCED, 1987). The report observes that "development is what we [all human cultures] all do in attempting to improve our lot" (WCED, 1987) in the world. This is both conceptually and empirically warranted: Indeed, all human cultures have a conception of progress. But how this conception is construed and expounded—the *sense* of it—differs from place to place. This invites us to not impose uniformity on the interpretations and concrete meanings on the normativity of such a term as development, to the thought that the logical necessity of such an imposition cannot be defended.

Yet another problem with this definition is its cargo of conceptual antecedents that have proven inimical to earlier development aspirations of Africa. I argue that sediments of ideas of the nature of development and of the universality of this nature, which pervade failures of development practice in Africa, saturate the conceptual pillars of "sustainable development" and subsequent efforts at its refinement. This brings to the fore questions about the extent to which this idea of sustainability harbor solutions to Africa's development aspirations: if "sustainable development" is envisaged as source of solutions to earlier failures of development, but carries elements of the source of those failures, then how can it, as a conceptual offspring of those failures, become at once a source of solutions to them?

2 | FEATURES OF "SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT"

The problematic nature of the vision is embedded in the distinctive features of the Commission's definition concept. First among these is that the most pressing development goal of our time is protecting the integrity (i.e., not depleting or permanently damaging) of resources in various domains of life; and that the most important of these domains is the environmental commons, as the continual existence of human life is dependent on it.³ Another of the defining features is that economic growth in functional (well-governed, scientifically and technologically progressive) societies is indispensable to sustainable development (WCED, 1987). This idea runs through the report and is most succinctly stated in the claim that "meeting essential needs require not only a new era of economic growth for nations in which the majority are poor, but an assurance that those poor get their fair share of the resources required to sustain that growth" (WCED, 1987). Let us note that the "new era" economy refers to a private-sector led economy. The economism of the vision is also noticeable in the Report's list of necessary conditions for attaining sustainability. These are, among others:

- (i) political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making,
- (ii) an economic system that is able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a sustained basis,
- (iii) a production system that respects obligations to preserve the ecology,
- (iv) a technological system that searches continuously for new solutions, and
- (v) an international system that fosters sustainable trade and finance (WCED, 1987).

Undoubtedly, (i) to (v) are economistic in emphasis, and conduces to the idea that sustainability is anchored in governance and technological efficiency funded by a vibrant private sector led economy, such as enabling affluent life at a proportionately less cost to natural resource consumption, and injustice. The third distinctive feature is the indicative intent of “sustainable.” It highlights the kinds of injustice to avoid by prescribing that development should imply justice in the distribution of the goods of nature for presently existing human beings at the international and intranational levels, and also for prospective humans.

Significant consensus has emerged in commentary on *Our Common Future*, that these features amount to a “the triple bottom line” (TBL); i.e., that the economy, the environment, and a technically functional society that is willing to conceive the threat that insufficiently ethical economic goals pose to the survival of humanity are sufficient conditions for obtaining sustainable development solutions. It is worth noting preliminarily, that these features indicate not a triple but singular bottom-line; i.e., a well-functioning economy upon which the other two are dependent.

2.1 | Theoretic antecedents of TBL

This assumption of sufficiency has been questioned. But before assessing this critique, let us consider kept theoretic antecedents of TBL to shed light on why TBL dominates contemporary development imagination. It is difficult to overlook the influence of TBL on internationally designed development goals. The treaties and protocols of the Rio Declaration (1992),⁴ the MDGs (2000), and the SDGs (2015) all defer to TBL. And such subsequent attempts to refine and operationalize TBL ideals, as UNEP’s Green Economy Initiative (2008), Eco-socialism, the imposition of ecological taxes and emission trading permits, have failed to overcome the damage that the economistic emphasis of TBL—its premising of ecological safety, human welfare and justice on private capital and the profit motive—continues to perpetuate.

This dominance of TBL on contemporary development imagination can hardly be dissociated from the philosophical and theological roots of its organizing concepts—its anthropocentric and instrumental character in Western thought. The Judeo-Christian tradition places man as a co-administrator of the Earth, and grants her the right to dominate the world; to “fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (King James Version of the Bible, Genesis 1:28). The Enlightenment secularized this prescription by dispensing with God as lawgiver for “the laws of nature.” Philosophically, this occurs in the conception of nature as separate from society, a thought which has remained entrenched in Western thinking since Descartes consigned nature to *res extensa*. Nature, as separate from human nature, then becomes a resource that is unconditionally available to human beings (Santos, 2014). The enlightenment also provided philosophical grounds for justified human domination.⁵ Thus, the positivism of the enlightenment, i.e., the rational-empirical scientific and technological culture which drove the industrial revolution

with the mediation of capital, had enough theoretical justification for the exploitation of natural and human resources, including slavery and colonialism, for economic growth. These theological and philosophical foundations, which establish an antithetical and superiority relationship between man and everything else that exists and legitimizes man's exploitation of non-human nature and other humans, are reaffirmed in Max Weber's hypothesis on the linkage between the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism and the development of capitalism and entrepreneurship (Weber, 1904).

Strong sediments of this trajectory of thought are deposited in TBL. From the 1950s, the Bretton Woods institutions, whose mandates were and continue to be predicated on trade liberalization, have steered the goals and strategies of development that reflect TBL. The TBL focus of these institutions was strengthened by their uptake of modernization theory, which structured the economistic and universalist streaks mentioned above. This occurs in modernization's claim that development comprises a process modeled on the evolutionary pathways of "developed" Western society. Rostow's theory of economic growth (Rostow, 1960), an exemplar of modernization theory, seeks to demonstrate that modernization is a phased and linear process toward economic development. Given this, the process tends toward the kind of homogeneity (universalism) argued in Talcott Parsons' structural functionalist theory, particularly in his claim that "the patterns of modernization are such that the more highly modernized societies become, the more they resemble one another (Levy, 1967)."

Thus, modernization theorizes the liberal economic and democratic stability that typify current Western societies as universally valuable models of modernity that the "backward" developing world should emulate. Hence in their development practice in Africa the Bretton Woods institutions paid scant heed to local conceptions. In fact, modernization's vision of progress implies that the knowledge and values traditions of "backward" cultures are eliminable on the path to development (Tipps, 1976). In the following three sections I emphasize how these sediments pervade TBL, and its elaboration and operationalization by subsequent UN and African development frameworks.

2.1.1 | MDGs and SDGs

The MDGs⁶ were established subsequent to the Millennium Declaration, and owe their orientation to the values of the Declaration and seven activities planned to be realized in conformity to these values. The activities are aligned with the 8 MDGs. These activities and their correlated MDGs were essentially the OECD's DAC⁷ international development goals. Yet their objectives, and the values which sustain them, are claimed to be universal in nature and applicability.

The seventeen SDGs⁸ may at first appear to depart from TBL. But closer examination negates this appearance, for the following reasons: For one, the problems which the SDGs tackle are substantially continuous with those of the MDSs, hence SDG and MDG objectives largely coincide.

Secondly, the UN presents the rationale of the SDGs as "to end poverty [economics], protect the planet [ecology] and ensure prosperity for all [human development via economics]. Further, in his *The Age of Sustainable Development* (Columbia University Press, 2015), Jeffrey Sachs, an architect of both the MDGs and SDGs Agenda,⁹ articulates the concept of sustainable development as involving "a world in which economic progress is widespread; extreme poverty is eliminated; social trust is encouraged ... and the environment is protected from human-induced degradation" (Columbia University Press, 2015).

Thus, TBL is deeply ingrained in the MDG and SDG frameworks in as much as their governance mechanisms favor liberalization of markets, and their financing mechanisms rely heavily on private sector resources and initiatives. Further, their emphasis on social goods (e.g., poverty reduction, health, education etc.) to be obtained by “good governance” of societies, is propped up by a functioning economy is *primus inter pares* among the three bottom lines. Thus, both frameworks conceive economic outcomes to be fundamental to environmental sustainability and for the sustainability of human/social development outcomes.

2.1.2 | TBL uptake in the African development context

Africa's development landscape is littered with policy goals that pay allegiance to TBL assumptions. The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed in the 1980s on African countries as conditions for concessionary loans and debt repayment arrangements by the World Bank and IMF, and the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSs) of the 1980s and 1990s (International Monetary Fund, 2016), were both economistic in as much as they assumed an ideal “structure” to which African economies must “adjust” (Preston, 1997). The SAPs ended up worsening “development” outcomes in implementing counties (Stiglitz, 2002); and PRSs failed to free Africa from the debt trap.¹⁰ This led to a declaration of a “paradigmatic crisis” in Africa's development in the 1990s by social scientists, who proceeded on a quest for “new paradigms”.¹¹ Subsequent to this declaration, two “homegrown” models were launched: NEPAD,¹² and Agenda 2063.¹³

I consider two things worrisome about these African models. First, is their subscription to the assumptions of modernization and thus to TBL, and also their incapacity to harness African perspectives to activate the moral and procedural requirements of conceiving what development is. The negligible uptake by NEPAD and Agenda 2063 of substantive African values cannot be gainsaid. Far from fulfilling its self-definition as an “African-owned and African-led development programme” (African Union, 2011), NEPAD affirmed modernization-theoretical assumptions by trivializing the role that African culture should play in the continent's development. It acknowledged “Africa's rich cultural legacy,” but assigned to this legacy merely the role of “consolidating the pride of Africans in their own humanity”.¹⁴

Likewise, AGENDA 2063 professes to present a blueprint for transforming Africa for the next 50 years. Two things are worth noting as problematic about the agenda, in light of the crucial importance of context for conceiving development: of the Seven Aspirations of the framework (each with its own set of goals which if achieved will move Africa closer to achieving the vision of the agenda), only one (Aspiration 5) mentions Africa's cultural heritage and values. And the stated goal of this aspiration is (1) “to ensure that the creative arts are major contributors to Africa's growth and transformation; and (2) restoring and preserving Africa's cultural heritage” Further, of fifteen “flagship programs” only one pronounces on the capacity of African cultural values to mobilize energies toward achieving the goals of the agenda. And this solitary pronouncement gears toward establishing a museum “to create awareness about Africa's vast, dynamic and diverse cultural artefacts and the influence Africa has had and continues to have on the various cultures of the world” (African Union, 2013). These flagship programs are effortlessly aligned with the seventeen SDGs.

One may argue that these African frameworks nevertheless meet my assumed minimum requirement for sound development conceptualization, i.e., that they should represent the values and knowledge traditions of the object-society which they envisage to serve. “African participation” can be adduced in formulation of *Our Common Future*, as the Brundtland Commission

included African members¹⁵ and held consultative meetings in Africa.¹⁶ One may also argue in spite of the source of the MDSs in OECD ideals, they were formulated under the watch of an African Secretary-General of the UN, and that they were mainstreamed in national policies for implementation. Further, one can speak of Africa's "representation" in the UN's Open Working Groups (OWG) that drafted the SDGs, and in their national mainstreaming.

In spite of these, however, there is ample room to assert negligible African thought in conceptualizing the MDGs and SDG goals and in framing *Our Common Future*. Central tenets of African thought on the relationship between nature and human beings, and on human and social progress, can scarcely be found in the selection and elaboration of these goals. Mainstreaming into national implementation policy of goals which do not represent one's conceptions should hardly count for substantive representation. And although NEPAD and Agenda 2063 offer theoretical perspectives that differ *in degree* from the modernization-inspired paradigms that fostered and continues to perpetuate the "crisis of development," these perspectives do not differ *in kind* from the non-African models. Thus, NEPAD and Agenda 2063 may be "homegrown," but they are hardly nourished by the intellectual soil of Africa.

2.1.3 | Solutions for sustainability: Ecological economics/green economy

UNEP's Green Economy model and the field of ecological economics, mentioned earlier, have sought to "decouple" natural resource depletion and environmental damage from economic growth (Soederbaum, 2008). Such depletion and damage are considered to be due to the placement by conventional economics of nature outside demand and supply price mechanisms, which creates no incentives for economically active entities to limit extraction. A green economy is thus premised on economic growth powered by renewal and conservation of energy and the environmental commons toward improved human well-being, social equity, reduced environmental risks and ecological scarcities (UNEP, 2011); and attainment of virtually all SDGs.¹⁷

However, this vision opens renewable energy production and consumption to price mechanisms on an open market. According to UNEP, "greening not only generates increases in wealth ... but also produces a higher rate of GDP growth" (UNEP, 2011). Hence UNEP's Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) initiative aim at demonstrating "nature's values ... in economic terms and, where appropriate, suggest how to capture those values in decision-making".¹⁸ Accordingly, the green economy scarcely dispenses with TBL's allowance for corporate exploitation of natural resources for profit. These green economic ideas form the fulcrum of the values of the Sustainability Business Institute¹⁹ and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.²⁰

UNEP's green economy is a variant of ecological economics, hence ecological economics is said to differ from conventional economical insensitivity in resource extraction for profit (Söderbaum, 2004). But as with the green economy model, ecological economists leave room to wonder whether their "rejection" of the theories and approaches of neoclassical economics amounts to peripheral or substantive changes. In Soderbaum's view, for instance, visions of a "paradigm shift" from mainstream economics by ecological economists "would seriously limit the ecological economics project" (Söderbaum, 2004). Admittedly, Soderbaum cannot be taken to represent all ecological economists. Herman Daly, for instance, foresees a "steady state economy" in which GDP remains at a constant with the pursuit of the values of ecological economics. But in spite of this optimism, it is no exaggeration to assert that what ecological economics, UNEP's TEEB initiative, and "sustainability as a business" demonstrate is that the idea of nature as a

neo-classical economic resource continues to have a stranglehold on strategies for realizing the SDGs. Thus, ecological economics seems to lack the conceptual resources to substantiate its vision of making nature less of an economic externality, as it is unable to resolve the problem of exploitation by capital. Several other solutions for achieving sustainability, including ecotaxes²¹ and emission trading permits²² etc., reinforce rather than discard the paradigm of the exploitation of nature for profit that TBL entails.

It appears, therefore, that envisaged solutions for sustainability prove to be recalcitrant barriers to it. The optimism assigned to the merits of a prioritized private sector-led economy in TBL—i.e., the ability to simultaneously pursue the profit motive, conserve the integrity of the commons and accumulate surplus for funding the SDGs and Agenda 2063—may need revisioning. But the progression of scientific and technological sophistication under the drive of the profit motive, led by Western culture, undermines the rationality of alternative visions of development. Viable development is often seen as that which leads to this progression, notwithstanding the threat of an abortive humanity which it poses. TBL continues to underlie international political policy imaginations. Indicators such as growth of GDP and disposable income of households per capita etc. continue to be the hallmarks of national development. The idea of the market value of the natural world lingers in these indicators. And reports from the scientific community continue to warn that human lifestyles that precipitate an unprecedented overconsumption of resources continue to degrade the environment, change the climate, and deplete biodiversity. The trajectory of this story has not changed since the publication of the findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (UN Report, 2005). The UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019) Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in 2019²³; the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021), as well as the first UNEP Synthesis Report on climate change and biodiversity loss (UNEP Report, 2021) tell the threats that climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss pose to sustainability. The current picture is that “the stability and resilience of our planet is in peril,” and this spells a looming “existential threat to [human] civilization” (Leahy, 2019; Lenton et al., 2019). It is precisely for this reason that the need arises to see virtue in other forms of comprehending human progress that shifts conceptual perspectives in kind but not only in degree.

3 | AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY

The foregoing considerations sketch a cursory overview of Western orientations on development and their antecedent impetus. I am well aware that it may be considered lopsided, and as according little favor to the development practice of the UN and other multilateral agencies. My intention with the overview would be parochial indeed if it had sought to dispute the marvelous achievements of these orientations for human civilization. But while I concede this, I remain convinced that because these “gains have given rise to trends that the planet and its people cannot long bear” (WCED, 1987). The sketched point-of-view on the threats embedded in the conceptual seeds of TBL is one that needs urgent emphasis today, thanks to its distinctive influence and dire implications for the human future. The several achievements of Western thought and the global institutions it steers have been emphasized and discussed over and again globally, and from these I gather support for my disinclination for lengthier defense of my overview, and for preference for an exposition of thoughts from other lands. Thus, I proceed to African perspectives.

3.1 | The idea of sustainable development

I consider four of these. Let us begin with a semantic problem. Do the terms in the concept “sustainable development” cohere meaningfully? Some commentators deny they do. James Brown considers the concept and its amplification by Jeffrey Sachs (2015) as an oxymoron, because its dual aspirations of continual economic growth and preservation of the integrity of the environment are inconsistent (Brown, 2015). A correlate of Brown’s critique is De Sousa Santos’ perception that the adjectival qualification of noun “development” evacuates the critical meaning of the noun.²⁴ On this view, the notion of development is inherently normative, and the adjective draws attention from this normative import. Hence “sustainable” is not only semantically superfluous but blurs the clarity of connotations of “development.”

Santos’ reasoning resonates with African thought. Development, in Twi,²⁵ for instance, translates into *nkɔsɔɔ*,²⁶ a term which implies sustainability. This implication inheres in *Nkɔsɔɔ*’s harboring of the idea of a progressive normative dimension to progress: it means advancement from a point of departure in a direction toward a desirable end, and implied in this is expectation that such advancement be measured in terms of suitable refinements of the attributes of that point of departure. Thus, what constitutes development is automatically that which is, at least, worth sustaining (maintaining). But, preferably, development ought to add positively to the features and conditions of the departure point. On this view, any movement that negatively affects the point from which the pursuit of development commences is, properly speaking, “dis-development” or “negative-progress,” an absurdity. Hence on the terms of *nkɔsɔɔ*, to qualify “development” by “sustainable” creates a conceptual problem, an ambivalence that places the ethical import of “development” in suspense.

The semantical import of *nkɔsɔɔ* is philosophically fleshed out by Kwame Gyekye. For him, an object is developed that has acquired the “capacity to perform the functions appropriate to its welfare satisfactorily (Gyekye, 1994). For a society, this functional capacity inheres in its ability to respond adequately to the existential difficulties of its citizens; and an “adequate response” implies effective resolution of those problems—a resolution that accelerate their welfare goals (Gyekye, 1994). Gyekye’s behavioral concept thus requires reasoned agency and inventiveness—behavioral characteristics—that define and refine the ability of objects of development to function satisfactorily by pursuing their welfare (Gyekye, 1994). As such, Gyekye’s objects of development are, simultaneously, agents of development.

3.2 | The moral value of sense-making and contextualization

Gyekye’s concept brings to the fore another barrier to sustainability: the presumed universal validity of the goals and priorities of development. As said in the Introduction, the fact that aspiration to development is a human universal does not preclude the soundness of plural conceptions of it, as the construal and elaboration of the concept differs from place to place. This underlies the crucial relevance of contextual values and knowledge to development conceptions, and the problematic nature of scant African inputs into post-WW2 development practices on the continent. But why is the false universality in these visions of development problematic?

I offered an empirical reason in answer to this question in Section 3.1.2: exclusion of contextual knowledge and values contributed to the inevitable failure of the models in practice. To this I add a theoretical reason: deliberately discarding the continent’s intellectual products and milieu in goals meant for its development is immoral. For, there must be “things” to retrieve from

repositories of experience in Africa's history of social organization to contribute to designs of its progress, and to intentionally overlook this is to erode the moral content of those development models.

The immorality of such intentional omit derives from the fact that contextual inputs into conceptual mapping for progressive transformation represent a “fundamental human right of decisional representation” (Wiredu, 1996); which are pivotal for the success of such transformations. If intended beneficiaries of development are objects of moral value, then this right of decisional representation must be active to enable them to make sense of development visions at the instance of their formulation. I use “sense-making” in the technical sense of the term evolved from the work of Weick, that the context and content of the experience of rational agents are pivotal for their capacity to formulate goals and strategies for the successful development of their organization (Weick, 1995). Thus, sense-making supplies a shared normative perspective negotiated by rational agents, which drives creative transformation of social norms and structures. One can hardly make sense of development goals in which one has no role in initiating; goals that offer its objects no voice in deliberation on why those goals are preferable and how they should be directed; goals that encourage imitation of ideas about the good, the beautiful, the desirable, truth and mute such ideas in the cultural context of their application. Hence deliberately shunning sense-making abandons the moral sense of development.

3.3 | The value of relationality in a moderate ecological perspective

The anthropocentric emphasis of TBL and its antecedents, expressed in the subjection of non-human nature to man's dominion, have been mentioned as barriers to sustainability. African moral thought on human and societal progress likewise retains an anthropocentric perspective by upholding the preservation of human life as the foremost ethical obligation. But such preservation requires not domination but conservation of non-human life. The grounds of such moral positioning are in ontologies²⁷ that emphasize a different manifestation of human-centeredness from the version espoused by TBL. African philosophers largely agree on two noteworthy ontological claims. One is that the human being is by nature a relational being: she is by nature a member of a commune. She is logically distinct from other beings, but the reality of her being and the being of others intersects inextricably at a fundamental level. This is expressed by Mbiti's maxim that “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970). The other claim on which there is wide consensus is that a logical distinction can be drawn between present human beings, past humans (ancestors) and those as yet to be born; but human in reality comprises a continuum containing these triadic logical states. Those who have passed from present existence and those as yet to enter it are also beings of moral value that participate in the present by exerting influence on the moral decision-making of the currently living.

In accord with this multi-layered ontology, the metaphysical constitution of present humans is considered to comprise individualist and trans-personal dimensions that work in unison to facilitate internal-constitutive cohesion and relationality at the social levels, to simultaneously maintain the individuality of persons and insert them into communal reality. This constitution of humans makes possible talk of the ontological co-originality of persons and community, of persons in commune as necessarily mutually dependent beings. Although a fundamental right is granted a priori to discard social affiliations and mutual interdependencies into which one was born (Wiredu, 1990), communal life per se is hardly considered optional (Gyekye, 1997). Thus, mutual interdependence and the reciprocal duties it solicits from everyone becomes a human

mode of being. The moral significance of this relational ontology is that to be human is to be different from others, but not to be indifferent in the social setting (Masolo, 2004).

Such construal of the relationship between person and community signifies the rejection in most African normative thinking of Hume's guillotine,²⁸ and its affirmations in the view that "nothing moral, just or otherwise prescriptive straightaway follows from any 'purely' metaphysical view" (Metz, 2014). I have argued elsewhere (Ajei, 2019), normative guides such as development conceptions are premised on ontological commitments. The objective of translating such guides into goals to serve the purposes and needs of humans by virtue of their intrinsic moral value suggests an aspiration to authenticate such intrinsic value through realizing these goals. Hence the assumptions underlying development goals—about human good, about desirable responses to human well-being etc.—are premised on a commitment to what their object (the human being) is. If these ends accrue to humans "in virtue of their humanity," then the question arises as to what is human-ness, such as to make certain goods owed to humans by virtue of it? This, then, is the ontological question which necessarily invites a response by a development model.

Kevin Behrens has suggested that the implication of this relational structure of being, that relations have a moral value in themselves, provides viable theoretical grounding of an environmentalism that assigns intrinsic value to human relation with non-human nature (Behrens, 2015). Indeed, most traditional African societies assign a deeper relation with non-human nature than her functional value as a source of sustenance. The biosphere is considered the ground of human existence, and thus has the characteristic status of an indispensable "being-with",²⁹ because one cannot conceive of human life and society without the environment in which they have their being. That is, one can vary the terms of Mbiti's maxim on relational ontology and say: "I am because the environment is, and because it is, therefore I am." This is another way of saying human beings belong to the earth rather than the earth belonging to us. The creation in Genesis of sentient man from earth, or her evolution by natural selection from an original nebulous cosmic bang, are but variations of this idiom of humans belonging to the earth. Hence in some African cultures, one almost has to ask for nature's permission to extract her resources for one's own good.

The idea of "being-with" the non-human nature rather than it belonging to us changes the value we assign to it from the industrial revolutionary viewpoint. Relational morality imbues non-human nature with intrinsic value and renders humanity and nature as co-moral valuables that ought to work in unison for mutual sustenance. This represents a humbler human approach toward the nonhuman world that sees non-human nature as a resource to be treasured but not dominated and exploited for our comfort. Such a perspective may be economically less rewarding, but its restorative power is worth consideration in the light of the looming threat to the human future.

3.4 | A wider perspective on community

The relationality of humans with the environment discussed above provides the possibility for extending the idea of community to non-living humans. This possibility arises if we understand the act of being in community—to commune—to mean relating with others in a structured way and assigning value to the structures that sustain such relationships. If so, then the idea of the co-morality of humans and non-human nature provides a structure that enables extension of the idea of community to include the commons. The commons, as part of community, correlates

with the idea of relationality of being. Community is conceptually bound with place, and the commons are the preconditions for its creation. They are thus part of what community is, not just instruments for the well-being of current humanity. Given that the commons are the preconditions for creating human community, the extension of community to include the commons points only to a logical distinction between human community and its situational backdrop—the commons. This perception that non-human nature is a necessary condition for the very existence of community is also well-captured in Akan thinking. The possibility condition for *Ɔman* (community) is *asaase*.³⁰ The village is founded on, and so includes, the earth. Your community is your earth. So, in a sense, a conception of community without the enabling place of its constitution is incomprehensible in Akan thinking. On this view, the idea of mining out the earth to grow community is paradoxical. Hence pursuits that degrade and deplete the resources of the earth can hardly constitute development.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

I have outlined African concepts, which I consider to be viable inputs for our thinking about development goals and the conceptual barriers erected by TBL and Western thought to such thinking. I would like to conclude the essay by considering their convergences and divergences with theoretical impulses in Western discourses on sustainability. The African emphasis on the value of relationality and deemphasis on the profit motive may be deemed continuous with eco-socialism, which qualifies as an anti-capitalist orientation in the “green movement.” Eco-socialists assert that an ecologically sustainable world is impossible to achieve in the context of capitalism, and regard socialism³¹ as a route to overcoming “the crises capitalism has set going” (Kovel & Löwy, 2001). For eco-socialists, globalization proliferates neoliberal capital across borders and aims steadfastly at the “naked exploitation of humanity and nature” (Kovel, 2007). Deep ecology also provides points of convergence with the African perspectives charter above, with its assignation of intrinsic value to non-human nature. For Leopold, land is “a community to which we belong,” and as such deserves our “love and respect” but not to be treated as “a commodity belonging to us” (Leopold, 1949). Leopold’s position is well-represented in the Earth Charter,³² which espouses ethically based environmentalist values that appeal to “a community of life,” and a “global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.”

These views would cohere with my African views on sustainability if they retain a particular anthropocentric accent. Leopold’s according of centrality to humankind in the scheme of existence can count, like the African positions I espouse, as an activist ecological perspective that sees moderate exploitation of nature for basic needs as posing virtually no risk for a tragedy of the commons. It is a moderate ecological activism that says “do exploit non-human nature, but do so with *respect* because you do not own it; and because you are in a relation of equal moral value with it.” With such emphasis, it would accord with the African positions and differ from a passivist and deep ecological prescription of human population control and non-interference in the non-human world as foundational strategies for protecting the “rights of nature.” I disagree with such deep ecology because disrespect for the intrinsic value of nature does not have to involve killing 100 elephants as trophies, or 10,000 pigs a year to process for *Prosciutto di Parma* intended to be consumed years later.

Further, if eco-socialism implies hatred for wealth accumulation, then it is easily distinguished from the African positions I advocate. The idea of relationality implies accommodation

of individual creativity for the common good. This is consistent with governments' guidance of capital away from exploitative tendencies, and governments' involvement in productive economic activity to stem or reverse the destructive course that private capital is charting. This position is inconsistent with unfettered eco-socialism, and in tune with Dill's perception of the SDGs as public goods whose realization requires more social than financial capital (Dill, 2008). I construe Dill's "social capital" to include alert public administration and global political will to combat the exploitative tendencies of capital.³³ It is my view that this public goods conception is consistent with public guidance of productive capital, sustained by a relational ontology of person and community.

Questions may arise about whether the African concepts in focus are capable of yielding actionable tools—tangible goals and indicators for measuring them—for development. The ambit of the aims of this paper does not allow for adequate attention to such questions. But it allows for asking: why may they not be?

ORCID

Martin Odei Ajei  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7258-8021>

ENDNOTES

¹ I have stated elsewhere my disagreement with a widely held perspective, that the notion "African" overly reifies the diversity and nuances within this diversity, of the cultures of Africa. I disagree, in concert with other philosophers (e.g., Thaddeus Metz, 2012, p. 22), with this. My use of "African" neither affirms cultural unanimity, nor entails the exclusivist claim that the values and knowledge I affirm as African are distinguished as uniquely African values. It means merely that such a perspective is present in sub-Saharan Africa to a noticeable extent relative to other geographical locations. This applies, analogously, to the notion of "the West" or "Western," as employed in this paper.

² Such as Agenda 21 of the Rio Declaration (1992), MDGs (2000), UNEP's Green Economy Initiative (2008), the SDGs (2015) and its Agenda 2030.

³ *Our Common Future*, Chairman's Foreword, p. 7, p. 216, The commons are the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society and held in common but not owned privately, and managed for collective benefit. They include natural resources of a habitable earth such as air, water, tropical rain forests, freshwater and marine ecosystems etc.

⁴ This declaration of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 established the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to combat "dangerous human interference with the climate system." Both the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and its successor the Paris Agreement (2015) seek to implement UNFCCC measures. The UNFCCC explicitly advocated enabling "economic development (i.e., TBL's version of it) to proceed in a sustainable manner." The continued currency of TBL on global development policy imagination is presently exemplified by the fact that the aim of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) held in Scotland in October–November 2021 is to reach consensus among parties to the Paris Agreement on arrangements for its implementation.

⁵ Kant's anthropology of race and Hegel's Philosophy of History, among others.

⁶ Adopted at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000. The MDGs are derived from the UN's Millennium Declaration (2000),

⁷ The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Established in 1948 by NATO countries to administer the Marshall Plan, the OECD now has 38 member countries, none of which is from Africa.

⁸ Adopted in 2015 at the World Summit on Social Development as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

- ⁹ Sachs is currently the Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University. He is Special Advisor to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on the SDGs and previously advised UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on both the SDGs and MDGs. He was also advisor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the MDGs.
- ¹⁰ See <http://www.imf.org/external/np/prsp/prsp.asp> [21 May 2020].
- ¹¹ One academic response is "In Search of New Paradigms for African Development (ISENPAD)," through which the publication *African Perspectives on Development* (Himmelstrand et al., 1994) that professes a number of "homegrown" development strategies.
- ¹² Endorsed by African Heads of State and Government in October 2001 as the main development agenda for the continent.
- ¹³ Adopted at the 50th Anniversary of the formation of the OAU /AU, in May 2013.
- ¹⁴ Paragraph 182.
- ¹⁵ Bernard T. G. Chidzero, (Zimbabwe); Lamine Mohamed Padika, (Cote d'Ivoire); and Mohamed Sahnoun, (Algeria).
- ¹⁶ In Harare, 15–19 September; and Nairobi, 20–23 September, 1986.
- ¹⁷ The UN considers failure to secure the commons a grave threat to achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDGs 2 (zero Hunger), 6, (Clean Water and Sanitation), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 12-(Responsible Consumption and Production), 13 (Climate Actions), 14 (Life Below Water) and 15 (Life on Land. See: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Global%20Environmental%20Commons_Layout%20050520.pdf.
- ¹⁸ <http://teebweb.org>.
- ¹⁹ Founded in Silicon Valley in 1995, the Institute envisions itself as "the premier catalyst for the business community and public to take the lead in implementing equitable worldwide sustainability practices".
- ²⁰ Founded on the eve of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to involve business in sustainability issues, and with the vision to realize the "inescapable role" that business have "to play in the search for sustainable development."
- ²¹ Ecological taxation, levied on activities which are considered to be harmful to the environment.
- ²² Emissions trading is a market-based approach to controlling pollution by providing *economic incentives* for reducing the emissions of *pollutants*. In an emissions trading scheme, a central authority or governmental body allocates or sells a limited number of permits that allow a discharge of a specific quantity of a specific pollutant over a set time period; and polluters that want to increase their emissions must buy permits from others willing to sell them.
- ²³ <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>. Accessed on 8th October 2021.
- ²⁴ Epistemologies of the South, p. 33. Here, he cites as instances of this subversion adjectives such as "inclusionary," "sustainable," "democratic."
- ²⁵ The language of the Akan, a folk group that inhabits much of the south and middle belts of Ghana and the eastern part of the Ivory Coast. Akans are the largest folk group in both countries, and constitute approximately 40% of the population of Ghana and 30% of the Ivory Coast.
- ²⁶ The vowel [ɔ] in *nkɔsɔ* is pronounced as the vowel in the English word "on."
- ²⁷ By "ontology" I mean, simply, a philosophical account of things that are, i.e., of "being."
- ²⁸ By this I refer to Hume's well-known insistence that from factual premises one cannot derive any normative conclusions.
- ²⁹ I am appropriating Heidegger's use of the notion of "being-with" as referring to an ontological characteristic of the human being that it is necessarily with others of its kind.
- ³⁰ *ɔman* = community, and *asaase* = the earth.
- ³¹ I understand this simply as system in which the means of production and distribution are publicly owned and controlled.

- ³² Launched in 2000, the Charter purports to be a global consensus statement of values and principles for a sustainable future.
- ³³ By this I allude to political formations that establish no discontinuity of the spaces between states, and within individual states maintain coherence between the rights and obligations of the state, community, and citizens.

REFERENCES

- African Union. (2011). *The new partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD)*. <http://www.dirco.gov.za/au.nepad/nepad.pdf>
- African Union. (2013). *Agenda 2063*. <https://au.int/agenda2063/flagship-projects>
- Ajei, M. O. (2019). Ontology and human rights. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 38(1), 17–29.
- Behrens, K. G. (2015). An African relational environmentalism and moral considerability. *Environmental Ethics*, 36(1), 63–82.
- Brown, J. H. (2015). The oxymoron of sustainable development. *BioScience*, 65(10), 1027–1029.
- Dill, A. (2008). *The SDGs are public goods—Costs, sources and measures of financing for development*. Policy paper to the UN Inter-Agency Taskforce on Financing for Development, Basel Institute of Commons and Economics.
- Gyekye, K. (1994). Taking development seriously. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11(1), 44–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5930.1994.tb00089.x>
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity* (p. 39). Oxford University Press.
- Himmelstrand, U., Kinyanjui, K., & Mburugu, E. (Eds.). (1994). *African perspectives on development: Controversies, dilemmas and openings*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations. (2021). *AR6 climate change 2021: The physical science basis*. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>
- The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). (2019). *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. In E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, & H. T. Ngo (Eds.), IPBES Secretariat. <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>
- International Monetary Fund. (2016). *Poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP)*. <https://www.imf.org/external/np/prsp/prsp.aspx>
- King James Version of the Holy Bible, Genesis 1:28.
- Kovel, J. (2007). Why ecosocialism today? *New Socialist*, 61, 10–11.
- Kovel, J., & Löwy, M. (2001). *EcoSocialist manifesto*. <http://www.greenleft.org.uk/manifesto.shtml>
- Leahy, S. (2019). *Climate change driving entire planet to dangerous 'tipping point'*. National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/earth-tipping-point>
- Lenton, T. M., Rockström, J., Gaffney, O., Rahmstorf, S., Richardson, K., Steffen, W., & Schellnhuber, H. J. (2019). *Climate tipping points—Too risky to bet against*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03595-0#author0>
- Leopold, A. (1949). *A sand county almanac, with essays on conservation from round river*. Oxford University Press.
- Levy, M. J. (1967). Social patterns (structures) and problems of modernization. In W. Moore & R. Cook (Eds.), *Readings on social change* (pp. 189–208, 207). Prentice-Hall.
- Masolo, D. A. (2004). Western and African communitarianism: A comparison. In K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A companion to African philosophy* (pp. 483–498, 459). Blackwell Publishing.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1970). *African religions and philosophy* (p. 141). Doubleday.
- Metz, T. (2012). African conceptions of human dignity: Vitality and community as the ground of human rights. *Human Rights Review*, 13(1), 19–37.
- Metz, T. (2014). Questioning African attempts to ground ethics on metaphysics. In E. Imafidon & J. A. I. Bewaji (Eds.), *Ontologized ethics: New essays in African meta-ethics* (pp. 189–204, 190). Lexington Books.
- Preston, P. W. (1997). *Development theory: An introduction* (p. 255). Blackwell Publishing.
- Rostow, W. W. (1960). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sachs, J. D. (2015). *The age of sustainable development*. Columbia University Press.

- Sachs, J., & Ki-Moon, B. (2015). *The age of sustainable development*. Columbia University Press.
- Santos, B. d. S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide* (p. 33). Routledge.
- Santos, D. S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the south* (p. 23). Routledge.
- Söderbaum, P. (2004). "Politics and ideology in ecological economics", *internet encyclopaedia of ecological economics* (p. 2). http://www.isecoeco.org/pdf/politics_ideology.pdf
- Soederbaum, P. (2008). *Understanding sustainability economics* (p. 6). Earthscan.
- Stiglitz, J. (2002). *Globalization and its discontents* (p. 86). W. W. Norton and Co.
- Tipps, D. C. (1976). Modernization theory and the comparative study of societies: A critical perspective. In C. E. Black (Ed.), *Comparative modernization: A reader* (pp. 62–88, 81). Free Press.
- United Nations. (2005). *Millennium ecosystem assessment*. <https://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.html>
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (2011). *Towards a green economy: Pathways to development and poverty eradication—A synthesis for policy makers*. , <https://web.archive.org/web/20160327113927/http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/AboutGEI/WhatisGEI/tabid/29784/Default.aspx>
- UNEP. (2021). *Making peace with nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies*. <https://www.unep.org/resources/making-peace-nature>
- Weber, M. (1904). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Routledge.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage.
- Wiredu, K. (1990). An Akan perspective on human rights. In A. A. An-Na'im & F. M. Deng (Eds.), *Human rights in Africa: Cross cultural perspectives* (pp. 243–260, 255). The Brookings Institution.
- Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars* (p. 180). Indiana University Press.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). *Our Common Future (Brundtland Report)*, Section I.3.27. <https://www.are.admin.ch/are/en/home/media/publications/sustainable-development/brundtland-report.html>

How to cite this article: Ajei, M. O. (2022). An African philosophical perspective on barriers to the current discourse on sustainability. *The Philosophical Forum*, 53, 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12306>