Realization of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The Project Manager's Role

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ABSTRACT: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) have sometimes been referred to as a vision of the future earth in terms of building a better environment for everyone. However, the 17 SDGs are thought to not be achievable by 2030 for several reasons that this study identifies. However, to get a critical and direct response to the realization of these goals, a profession that cuts across all disciplines and has direct involvement in project planning is needed, and project management was chosen for investigation. This article seeks to understand the function of project managers in the actualization of the UN SDGs because it was noticed that, despite how varied project management is in business, government, and NGOs, it hasn't been assigned a clear role. This became necessary because the majority of the SDGs' objectives and the criteria used to assess their success or failure are project-based and largely driven by non-state actors or NGOs. It is crucial to assess the responsibilities, reasons for setbacks, and the extent to which project managers are required to achieve Sustainable Development Goals moving forward.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), United Nations, Project Managers, Project Management

I. INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were replaced with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were agreed to by all UN members in a document called the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The document is a result of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Sachs, 2012). The MDGs are a proven and successful global mobilization strategy for accomplishing a set of crucial socioeconomic objectives worldwide. They bring up topics including environmental damage, gender inequality, unmet educational needs, poverty, starvation, and sickness. By organizing these objectives into an easily accessible set of eight goals and providing measurable and time-bound targets, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) helped to increase global awareness, government transparency, and better indicators. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as introduced by Bill Gates in 2013, served as a sort of progress report on the global fight against poverty from 2000 to 2015 and has been key in responding to social feedback and public requests. The United Nations reaffirmed its commitment to advancing living quality and sustainable development with the signing of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, which gave rise to a set of 17 goals as shown in table 1, known as the Sustainable Development Goals (Griggs, Stafford-Smith, et al., 2013; Sachs, 2015). However, regardless of this commitment, believes that whether the international community can achieve Agenda 2030 will be determined by whether trade-offs from across the full spectrum of SDGs can be reduced and synergies maximized over time (Kroll et al., 2019). Looking at other articles and publications, this work seeks is to assess the role of project managers in the actualization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A project manager integrates diverse interests and the profession cuts across diverse disciplines and industries (Kabeyi, 2018; Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2016).

With 8 years left before the end of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, there are questions about whether countries especially the under-developed and developing ones can meet up with the deadline (Ajala, 2022). The aim of this study, therefore, is to assess the role of Project Managers in the realization of Sustainable Development Goals. In doing this, the objectives are to identify factors affecting the actualization of Sustainable Development Goals, to access the role of the project manager in the realization of Sustainable Development Goals, and to Identify the challenges facing project managers.

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Table 1. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are listed below

Number	Goals
1.	No Poverty
2.	Zero Hunger
3.	Good Health and Well-being
4.	Quality Education
5.	Gender Equality
6.	Clean Water and Sanitation
7.	Affordable and Clean Energy
8.	Decent Work and Economic Growth
9.	Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure
10.	Reduce Inequality
11.	Sustainable Cities and Communities
12.	Responsible Consumption
13.	Protect the Planet
14.	Life Below Water
15.	Life on Land
16.	Peace and Justice
17.	Partnership for the goal

II. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE REALIZATION OF UN SDGS

The idea of the word "sustainable development" has its origins in environmental concerns, as seen by its first use in the 1960s (Hák et al., 2016). United Nations' 1982 World Charter for Nature. Sustainable development policies are quite difficult to implement. The Concept of sustainable development is not all about seeing the world from a theoretical perspective through a different lens, but a collection of guidelines for addressing the myriad of challenges that the world is currently facing, which would only expand and become even more difficult to address (Veselovská, 2017). Many efforts have been made toward sustainable development, however, the United Nations responded to the issue of sustainable development that it adopted the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

The global nature of the SDGs shows a high level of interconnectivity as the main aim is to carry everyone along the achievement of the 2030 agenda (Mansell et al., 2019). However, while there has been a performance framework that has been developed to support and monitor performance at the regional and national levels due to the global nature of the sustainable development goals, translating these frameworks to the subnational, organizational, and project levels have been a major challenge (Galli et al., 2018). Buttressing the need for a framework at the subnational, organizational and projects levels, (Adshead et al., 2019) opined that unless professionals such as project managers are equipped with the knowledge that adequately provides for visible impacts in the long term across all the agenda of the SGDs, they will not be able to contribute significantly through the making and implementation of informed decisions. A comprehensive social, economic, and environmental framework for SDGs, according to (Griggs, Staffor-Smith, et al., 2013), will help regulate the diverseness of the SDGs as well as enhance synergies across the targets.

The 169 targets contained in the 17 goals of the SDG make it unrealistic (Easterly, 2015). He argued further, that unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) the SDGs are ambiguous which is a reason a scholar referred to it as a "high-school wish list on how to save the world". Another factor affecting the realization of Sustainable Development Goals is that everything appears to be a priority, which makes nothing a priority (Easterly, 2015). However, (Sachs, 2015) argues that the SDGs as outlined by the United Nations are achievable and for him, this belief must be continuously emphasized to the public and policymakers because of scientifical and technological advancement.

Using Nigeria as a case study, making wrong assumptions about a country's internal structure, challenges, capacity and commitment of managers, and mode of operation could hinder the sustainable development plan (Oleribe & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). An example was given that the cause of poor health indices was due to lack of funds and poverty, making central funds be injected into the health care system, however, they further emphasized that wrong assumptions were made some of which were that those appointed to manage funds had the requisite qualifications, interest of the country, the program, and the capacity of fund management that will steer sustainable development. Absence of valid data, evaluation frameworks and health insurance schemes, industrial action, and insurgency, among others (Oleribe & Taylor-Robinson, 2016).

III. ROLES OF PROJECT MANAGERS IN THE REALIZATION OF UN SDGS

The most essential notion of our time is sustainable development. It is increasingly becoming the responsibility of private sector firms, rather than only governments, to enhance the environment of their country. Businesses influence the evolution of sustainability as a concept, and the burden of ensuring organizations and their leaders will be held responsible for long-term progress. Sustainable development has now become a major concern for everyone on the earth, yet world leaders continue to struggle to recognize and focus their efforts on it (Shobayo & Elumah, 2017). (Armenia et al., 2019) argued that project management is at the core of the "Tripple-P" of sustainability. They argued that for there to be a sustainable impact on the people, planet, and profit there must be a synergy between sustainability and project management. Globally today, one of the trendiest global trends in project management is the integration and synergy between project management and sustainable development (Magano et al., 2021). To be able to achieve strategic objectives, project managers must be given specific and strategic roles as they are essential tools in the achievement of set goals (Shobayo & Elumah, 2017). They further argued that the role of the project manager is crucial as he is at the core of the changes needed for sustainable development.

A. The Change perspective

While the role of the project manager in the United Nations 2030 Agenda is not defined, (Goedknegt, 2012) argues that the project manager oversees and takes responsibility for all actions that are required to complete the project's goals. Brundtland report (1987) earlier drew further attention to the statement that in essence, sustainable development is a change process in which resource exploitation, investment direction, technology development orientation, and institutional change are all in sync, enhancing current and future capacity to meet human needs and ambitions (Goedknegt, 2012). While (Chofreh et al., 2019) later acknowledged the relationship between project management as carried out by project managers and sustainable development, they however saw the role of the project manager from the "change perspective". For them, projects are typically used to bring about changes in society, and the combination of sustainable development and project management ideas contributes to genuine shifts in thoughts, processes, collaboration, and partnerships at all levels. The Increasing pressure to ensure more sustainable development has raised the need for project managers to be informed in this field of sustainability and play prominent roles in the development of a sustainable society. Project managers are well-positioned to take the lead in addressing issues relating to sustainable development and in the choices and actions relating to project delivery (Gilbert Silvius et al., 2017).

B. The Profession perspective

(Mansell et al., 2019) stated that one of the most serious global "Grand Challenges" currently threatening our existence is failure to meet the 2030 benchmark of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG), and project management as a profession plays a critical role, perhaps the most important role after governments, in achieving the 2030 targets. Projects are necessary for the SDGs to understand the necessary changes (Shobayo & Elumah, 2017). While making plans in the preliminary stage of a project, the project manager is also tasked to manage policies guiding the execution of such a project (Goedknegt, 2012), therefore Project management as a profession stands as a focal point for implementing the 17 sustainable development goals. Due to the flexibility of the project management role, a project manager can work as a project manager in each of the key societal sectors of health, education, the environment, engineering, government, and NGOs. As a result, project management has become a focal profession for advancing the UN SDGs, and project managers are expected to enthusiastically embrace the UN SDGs. However, to achieve these goals, there need to be measurable ways of assessing and actualizing the UN SDGs since project management is a profession that mainly deals with tools that ensure the measurability of projects to identify bottlenecks, shortfalls, opportunities, and successes. While there seems to be a consensus on the relevance of project managers and their roles in the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the level to which they agree varies (Daneshpour, 2017; Wang et al., 2017) argues that the relationship between sustainable development and project management has not been given sufficient attention.

C. The Ethical perspective

It has been suggested that project managers should effectively familiarize themselves with the merits of sustainability and tools that will ensure that every project is poised to create a sustainable society (Silvius & Schipper, 2014). To achieve these, project managers are to hold their ethics of good project delivery high enough to influence the workforce down the labour chain. As frontliners in any change or new activity within an organization, project managers are naturally positioned to influence sustainability, however, some studies have argued that the organization has a role to play in positioning project managers with ethical guides that promotes SDGs before they can perform with ease. Studies have further critically analyzed the role of a project manager and made a moral appeal to drive project managers in taking up responsibilities that promote sustainability (Goedknegt & Silvius, 2012). Since most of the SDG's aim is to improve people's relationships with one another, animals, economic prosperity, and the environment as a whole, and because there is a life cycle in which humans and animals benefit from the earth just as much as it does from them, maintaining ethical concerns should not be a passive process. Instead, it should begin with project conception and continue through to project completion. Studies have tried to tie the implementation of some of the sustainable development goals by an organization as part of corporate social responsibility, however, this study seeks to put the project manager at the forefront and emphasize the SDGs as not

just a section of the management plan, but the entirety should focus on achieving the SDGs. According to (Helgadóttir, 2008), project management has grown to the point where debates and discussions on ethical guidelines, and standards and educating members within its project should be done willingly as a moral necessity. Figure 1 below further buttressed that the future of project managers is now intertwined with not just creative and logical thinking, but also ethical thinking and a mix of these competencies will build a credible project manager that can take up the challenges of meeting the SDGs beyond 2030.

Figure 1. Recommended thinking competencies of a project manager (Helgadóttir, 2008)

IV. CHALLENGES FACING PROJECT MANAGERS

A. Community acceptance

The project manager is confronted with numerous problems and despite numerous initiatives to include sustainability in project management, the international community and local community have failed to recognize and accept norms for sustainability in project management (Borg et al., 2020). Communities play a significant role in the implementation of every project, therefore their opposition to sustainable strategies could result in delays, termination, and in some circumstances, a change in plans to accommodate their agitations, contradicting the objectives of the UN SDGs.

B. Diverse nature of SDGs

The diverse nature of the goals embedded in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda poses a challenge, and analyses are generally restricted to the industry or structure of the person or people analyzing due to the inherent diversity and immeasurable systems and functions of the goals (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019).

C. No Priority in SDGs

The project management working strategy is accustomed to the use of tools to categorize tasks in scales of preferences, however, for the UN SDGs everything seems to be a priority, and this could be challenging because distraction could eventually lead to poor actualization of goals.

D. Lack of measurement framework of SDGs

Also, the lack of tools and framework for the project-level measurement of SDG success poses a significant challenge to project managers' role in realizing sustainable development goals (Mansell et al., 2019). According to (Mansell et al., 2019), Project management deals with specifics, however, the ambiguity of the SDGs (Easterly, 2015) makes it a difficult task for project managers to deal with the document.

E. Navigation

It is a significant challenge faced by project managers, especially older professionals who find it difficult to identify and navigate changes and sustainable transitions (Carragher & O'reilly, 2021). This raises the awareness of crew changes and the need to have flexible project managers that are conversant with goals and technology to drive new changes that support the UN SDGs.

F. Diverse nature of SDGs

The drivers of SDGs are not just concentrated on project managers rather it takes several groups, communities, and tools to promote the UN SDGs. According to (Carragher & O'reilly, 2021), the following drivers sends a good message to immediate communities on SDGs, and are, social media, customized toolkits, training, measurements, the ascription of responsibilities, funding, confidence/agency, composters, incentives, newspapers, commitments, radio information, networking, rivalry, politicians leading the way, need to save money, website information, TV, moral dilemma, local authority, norms, recognitions, recycling depots, neighbors, local narratives, children, storytelling, and friends. The multiplicity of mediums needed to drive UN SDGs makes the task of a project manager who organizes all these more difficult and complex. Therefore, they need a clear framework to upscale the realizations of the SDGs.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper has critically discussed the potential of realizing the UN SDGs by 2030 and the Project management role has been identified as a substantial role that stands a greater chance of driving such a quest due to its flexibility as a profession and

involvement in the planning and monitoring of projects that affects the future. The involvement of a project manager in achieving the UN SDGs was examined from the change, professional and ethical perspectives and it is therefore concluded that if a project manager clearly understands the essence of the SDGs and the responsibilities placed on their profession from these perspectives, then there will be an increased possibility of achieving the UN SDGs by 2030. Reviews of works of literature have already indicated that the UN SDGs' design contains flaws, and project managers are also frequently confronted with difficulties that have the potential to impair their performance. Therefore, an improved engagement with community stakeholders, prioritized unit goals, a framework that is universal and measurable, sensitization of project managers and diverse unit drivers of UN SDGs to enhance the identification and implementation of changes that promote the realization of the UN SDGs could be the optimal way of meeting the target goals in record time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having identified how critical the project management role is in every organization, government, and NGO, it is ideal to recommend that proper enlightenment should be done to project managers establishing the importance of inculcating the UN SDGs in project planning and management decisions. Also, attributed to the reason that the UN SDGs are a global objective that all member states are expected to achieve, it is crucial for project managers in developing and underdeveloped nations to receive encouragement, support, and adequate tools, especially technological know-how, in order to increase the likelihood of actualization in those nations. Furthermore, works of literature have argued about the poor existing frameworks of the UN SDGs that makes it immeasurable and without priority goals and milestones which further makes the work of project managers difficult when attempting to implement policies, plans and structures during project conceptualization that will promote the realization of the UN SDGs, therefore, it is recommended that these loophole in the framework of the UN SDGs be covered.

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