

## **The SDG agenda and university transformation in Africa: The decolonial turn deferred?**

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### **Abstract**

*The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in September 2015 set the scene for a renewed and ambitious development framework in a global context of widening inequalities within and between countries, global economic crises, conflict and climate change. Higher education is framed in several of the targets that make up SDG 4 and is also argued as central to achieving all 17 goals. However, the extent to which they engage with higher education in the context of calls for responsive, decolonised higher education remains underexplored. It is this gap that this paper addresses, arguing that while the SDGs take a broad approach to education the focus on specific targets and indicators limit states' autonomy by de-territorialising local frameworks (Sayed & Moriarty, 2020). As a result, universities in Africa struggle to assert their agendas as power is overly located at the supra national level. We use the case of South African higher education to examine how and in what ways the national education agenda articulates with the SDG agenda. In particular, we focus on the lack of a clear equity and anti-racist focus in the SDG agenda which fails to engage with the disciplinary hold of racism over knowledge. We use Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2014) notion of difficult questions in higher education with weak answers to address what a decolonised and deracialised higher education system might look like. In particular, we articulate how Western domination has marginalised knowledge present in the global South. In so doing, we describe the influence of the SDGs in higher education noting the strides made but also their limited application in the global South and the decolonial turn. We argue that the decolonisation of*

*knowledge in higher education is a collective process in which disruptive disciplinary practices contribute to cognitive global justice.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate change, higher education system, historically white, transformation, equity.

## **Introduction**

In September 2000 at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in New York, 189 member countries agreed to adopt eight broad, global Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. Related to education, MDG 2 focused on achieving universal primary education within the fifteen years. In March 2015, the UN General Assembly agreed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 169 associated targets to assist with measuring achievement of the goals. SDG 4 ("Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all") was further committed to at the global level at the 2017 World Economic Forum (WEF) in Incheon, South Korea. SDG 4 can be seen as an advance on MDG 2 in that it includes a focus not simply on enrolment but on the quality of education globally and on life-long learning. Both sets of global development agendas identify the reduction of poverty as the ultimate development goal and both see education as central to addressing global poverty.

In recent years, global education policy has witnessed what Sayed and Moriarty (2021) call the 'quality turn,' which requires a decolonised approach to education and a turn to decolonial thinking in higher education. SDG 4 is measured by seven outcome targets and three means of implementation. While there have been many critiques of the global development agenda including its 'one size fits all' approach, the hollowing out of a comprehensive and holistic approach to education and the need to prioritise education in combatting environmental destruction (Nhamo, 2021), the link between decolonial thinking and the role of universities in achieving SDG 4 is underdeveloped. This paper aims to address this gap by considering the possibilities of incorporating a decolonial approach to SDG 4.

The paper begins by describing the theoretical frameworks that underpin our approach and then considers the policy history of the SDGs. This is followed by a critical review of the literature about the role of universities in the SDGs, focusing on higher education in Africa including South Africa. Next, the paper explores the SA case, and reflects on progress on access, equity and decolonisation and curriculum change, addressing the achievement of the SDGs in the national context.

### **Theoretical framing: SDGs, the global education agenda, and decolonisation**

The paper analyses the SDG agenda in higher education in South Africa using an equity and anti-racist lens, paying attention to the disciplinary hold of racism over knowledge (Keet, 2021). We use Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2014) notion of difficult questions in higher education with weak answers to address what a decolonised and deracialised higher education system might be. In particular, we articulate how Western domination has marginalised knowledge present in the global South and how the global SDG agenda may entrench this subordination.

Our starting point is to consider transformation and decolonisation. Sometimes considered to be synonymous and sharing a focus on reform, change, equity and representation, they are rooted in different conceptions of what constitutes meaningful institutional and social change and consequently knowledge in higher education. Transformation as a concept in higher education policy and practice is concerned with demographic representation, inclusivity in teaching culture, expanding access and offering academic support and for this reason can be considered as being on the more politically liberal end of the spectrum (Joseph, 2017; Morreira, 2017). Decolonisation by contrast disrupts existing forms of coloniality in society and higher education by challenging epistemological and material/economic domination (Mignolo, 2011; Mamdani, 2016; Motala, Sayed & de Kock, 2021). Decolonisation encompasses transformation but transformation cannot be reduced to the radical programme of change that decolonisation seek to bring about.

Decolonisation as a field of enquiry is characterised by epistemic questions - what and whose knowledge is affirmed, prioritised and legitimised (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2014) - and material questions including issues of resourcing, economic exclusion and deprivation (Motala et al., 2021). Decolonisation holds that the political ending of colonialism did not end the domination, cultural imperialism and economic extraversion that characterised the colonial project (Ashcroft et al., 2003). Rather, it mutated into forms of neo-colonialism in which the global North as a standard of development, humanity and innovation prevails and continues to assert dominance of, and 'others', those of the Global South (Mignolo, 2011; Morreira, 2017). Because universities in the African context are so historically rooted in the project of colonial expansion, they are implicated in upholding and reproducing this coloniality (Morreira, 2017). How knowledge is organised, by whom, for whom and to what end is an important indicator of the extent to which coloniality is still embedded within higher education and, by extension, society.

The politics of knowledge production is arguably key to calls for decolonisation in higher education that seek to overcome epistemic dependency and subjugation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Keet, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2017). Universities reproduce coloniality through their endorsement, legitimisation and valorisation of particular forms of knowledge, pedagogy and practice. Keet (2014) and others (Garuba, 2015; Heleta, 2016; Morreira, 2017) argue that, while issues of access are important in higher education, to decolonise knowledge and curricula is to grapple with what knowledge is, whose knowledge counts and what are the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of disciplines and knowledge forms and canons (Hountondji, 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014). Framed in this way, decolonisation goes beyond inserting African voices into existing canons or ‘Africanising’ curricula through a process of reform. It is process by which disciplines, and the very notion of disciplinary knowledge, require fundamental disruption and reimagining of what and whose knowledge is prioritised (Motala, 2020).

Within this framework, we view the SDGs as part of a historical process sharing an epistemic lineage with the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights which included access to education as a universal human right. This was reinforced in subsequent global education commitments before the SDGs: in the MDGs and the Education for All (EFA) framework, in 2000, of the United Nations Education and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). However, the SDG education agenda marks a sharp disjuncture with the previous global education agenda as it centres attention on what is learnt and the knowledge function of education. Sayed & Moriarty (2020, p. 19) suggest that, to an extent, the turn to quality education in the SDGs targets and indicators reflects earlier global policy agendas but, significantly, “represents a shift in [global education policy] focus” from access to education to learning and the quality of learning. However, this shift in focus has occurred in a narrow and limited way that has *inter alia* limited educators’ agency by under-emphasising teacher education and neglecting curriculum development.

This centring of knowledge in education in the SDG agenda has two key dimension which warrant attention. First, although the literature contests the ideas of sustainable, development and goals, these terms are presented by the UN and UNESCO, individually and collectively (as the SDGs), as uncontested and universal. The idea of sustainable development is presented as achieving a balance between social, economic and environmental needs. This assumes global applicability and fails to foreground the idea that different cultures will have

different interpretations of the relationship between society, economy and the environment (Burford et al., 2013, p. 303).

Secondly, SDG 4.7 seeks to provide arguably a more holistic approach to education and knowledge and for the first time in the SDG agenda argues for the ‘appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development’. However, Sayed & Moriarty (2020, p. 202), who describe SDG 4.7 as a “residual target” given its broad ambition, point out that the “lumping together” of the diverse learning needs of stakeholders can potentially prove a difficult task for national governments, for example, to implement. Importantly, the measure it uses to ascertain achievement of this goal is underpinned by a modernist discourse which assumes that societies go through stages of development in their economic growth from traditional societies based on agrarian economies to economic maturity characterised by high levels of mass consumption and technological advancement (Rostow, 1962). The potential for SDG 4.7 to support the development of an education for sustainability that is alternative to the modernist notions is clear; however, as is true of many of the SDGs, because it is tied to the neoliberal agenda of monitoring and measuring quality it reduces the expansive and radical knowledge in education and learning to narrow instrumentalist understanding and measures, reflecting a continuing coloniality of thought.

### **South African and African universities’ approaches to SDG 4 and education: key debates**

Having sketched out the global development agenda, particularly the SDGs and how education policy is located within this, this section considers the framing of the SDG 4 in the South African and African context.

First, the literature on the relationship between the SDGs and higher education institutions (HEIs) is small but growing. In the South African context, this literature contains one central argument: that HEIs have a role to play in achieving not only SDG 4, which focuses on lifelong learning, but all 17 goals. Scholars also agree that HEIs have a role to play in developing the capacity and skills required for achieving all SDGs and particularly SDG 4 (Aarts et al., 2019). In a study of the ways in which Education graduates at a particular university contributed to the achievement of several of the SDGs through their post-university work, Jamison and Meggan (2021) argue that HEIs are key sites for developing the cross-sectoral individual and institutional capacities needed to achieve the SDGs and specifically SDG 4.7. These ways include integrating SDGs into research and research capacity development and policy design and offering research-based advice to national education

departments (Ketlhoilwe et al., 2020). Scholars also agree that HEIs play a role in implementing the SDGs (Nhamo & Mjimba, 2020a) and in developing the ESD curriculum (Shava et al., 2020).

Second, a key aspect of the debate about the SDG 4 in relation to higher education in South Africa is what Nhamo (2021) calls localisation. In the introductory chapter to the edited volume *Sustainable Development Goals and Institutions of Higher Education*, Nhamo and Mjimba (2020b) suggest that localisation of SDGs occurs in three major ways: in the teaching and learning space; in the research and development space; and in the governance and management of HEIs. Dube et al. (2021) show how the latter calls for a specific type of leadership and governance style which recognises the need for reducing poverty but expands this to focus on service delivery of resources needed for achieving the SDGs. Nhamo et al. (2020) argue that domestic resource mobilisation is a necessary factor in countering or complementing the official development assistance (ODA) flows that endorse SDG implementation at HEIs. The international donor aspect of mobilising resources to localise SDGs in HEIs might be at odds with the discourse on decolonisation as the SDGs were arrived at through unequal, international processes of negotiation and deliberation (Nhamo, 2021). However, and linked to localisation, Nhamo and Chikodzi (2021, p.191) note that “Universities remain at the forefront of scaling up the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its interlinked 17 goals”. It is through localisation and adapting the SDGs to local contexts that they are made “relevant for, in and with societies” (Nhamo et al., 2021, p.3).

Third, while there is a growing body of literature about decolonisation and particularly about how universities should attempt to decolonise, there is scant literature about decolonisation as it relates to SDG 4 or the possibilities for decolonial thinking in the SDG. Development theorists such as Ogunrotifa (2015) and Samir Amin (2006) who focus on the political economy of global development agendas, in which the SDGs are rooted, argue that because of the historical hegemonic dominance of the global North over the global South, interventions such as the SDGs can be described as “‘grand developmentalism’ - the general and narrow way in which development issues are defined and problematized takes priority over questions posed by the empirical world” (Ogunrotifa, 2015, p. 1). This raises a question about how we can begin to talk about decolonisation in light of the SDGs, given that they can be regarded as representing the antithesis of decolonisation which is a form of neo-colonialism or epistemological hegemony. However, there is agreement about transformation of universities and of university curricula in particular (Tella & Motala, 2020; Albareda-Tiana et al., 2018).

In South Africa, university transformation has been markedly slower than in other social institutions although there have been notable efforts to transform their institutional cultures (Morreira, 2015) and epistemological traditions (Motala et al., 2021). Albareda-Tiana et al. (2018, p. 474) note that “transformation is a complex and long-term ambition. It must start by recognizing the SDG agenda calls for a paradigm shift in education. It is not only a matter of transforming institutional responsibility but also curriculum reorientation and teaching to better serve the needs of current and future generations.” Thus, the debate about the SDGs in South African higher education returns to the themes of transformation and decolonisation. Scholars agree that transformation in universities is central to achieving SDGs and that, in turn, HEIs will facilitate the transformation of the societies in which they are located (Ketlhoilwe et al., 2020). As mentioned above, HEIs need to institutionalise capacity development specifically related to SDGs if they are to achieve any of the goals and “not leave any behind” (Savo et al., 2021, p.163).

Fourth, although it is widely asserted that HEIs play a key role in achieving the SDGs, there is debate in the literature about the specific role of universities in doing this. Scholars are grappling with questions about the nature of ‘development’ (globally sanctioned versus locally relevant) and ‘education’ whether formal, informal or non-formal (Karani & Preece, 2020). It is important to remember that the nature of development itself is contested, is not universally accepted and is dependent on specific approaches (Nhamo et al., 2020). Chankseliani and McCowan (2021) take simultaneously a rights-based approach and a liberation or Freirean approach since, they argue, the two are necessary for meaningful and contextually appropriate development programmes that teach people and communities the value and agency of freedom and ownership over their lives. Ketlhoilwe et al. (2020) raise the issue of the resources needed for integrating SDGs into HEIs’ visions and missions which, they argue, is one role that universities can play in realising the global goals.

Fifth, there is a growing body of literature about SDG 4 as it relates to its vision of “sustainability” that is argued to be narrow and reductionist and that overemphasises environmental and climate-related interventions (Albareda-Tiana et al., 2018). In this respect a key debate is, as Mjimba and Nhamo (2020, p.199) note, the fact that “sustainable development remains a relatively simple concept to understand. As such sustainable development remains difficult to practise and deliver”. In South Africa, SDG 4 and ESD have been “localised” at the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Nhamo, 2021), and to a lesser extent at the University of Cape Town (UCT) (Mawonde & Togo, 2019). The localisation of

strategies to implement the SDGs and ESD centre not on how universities can realise SDG Target 4.3 but on how issues of environmental sustainability can be adapted for teaching and learning in specific locales. Fadi El-Jardali et al. (2018) argue that universities are uniquely placed to participate in the cross-sectoral implementation of SDGs as they are centres of research and development. In addition, they point out that the role of universities in society is changing and that this presents a new opportunity for them to be integrated into SDG programmes (Fadi El-Jardali et al., 2018). The issue of university transformation - already contested - has further complicated the ways in which they locate their work in the overall pursuit of the SDGs and particularly SDG 4 (Fadi El-Jardali et al., 2018).

Sixth, Durofika and Ijeoma (2018) are more critical of the possibility that SDG 4 can be successful in universities and particularly in African universities or HEIs. They argue that, like the MDGs, the SDGs follow a top-down agenda for development and impose development goals and associated targets on developing countries and on institutions in those countries. They describe this process as a new form of colonialism and domination by global powers (Durofika & Ijeoma, 2018). Others, such as Easterly (2009), held this view about the MDGs and argued that the targets set by these global development policies positioned poorer countries and especially African ones at a permanent disadvantage. This is not by any deliberate scheme and cannot be explained by any conspiracy theory but is a methodological error. Setting level targets as opposed to absolute targets will always leave Africa unable to meet the SDG targets (Easterly, 2009). This conceptualisation of the neo-colonial nature of the SDGs is useful for picking through the decoloniality inherent in current global education policy, unpacked in the final section of this paper.

Finally, scholars are also debating the 'one size fits all' implementation of the goals which are set around pre-determined targets and strategies for implementation. Allais et al. (2020) argue that the quality of education should not be measured using the individualistic, narrow focus on enrolment but in terms of how HE benefits the wider society by addressing historical inequalities such as racism, sexism and structural poverty. Ogunrotifa (2015) suggests more explicitly that the SDGs are simply a continuation or cementing of the MDGs into global education policy, particularly as they have been introduced in Africa. Scholars argue for the need for context-specific solutions when implementing SDGs and that these should be aligned with national development policies as well as with those of multilateral organisations such as the African Union.



The debates about SDGs in general and SDG 4 in particular in South Africa and Africa raise substantive concern about its underpinning theoretical and philosophical assumptions, implementation, global domain over national priorities, and crucially the blind sport of attention to recentring the epistemic framework reflecting the knowledges in and of the Global South. In so doing the SDG and SDG 4 in particular can overcome the epistemic subjugation wrought by development approaches and theories which today still carry their imperial imprints.

### **The SDGs, equity, expansion and quality in higher education – the South African case**

In our reading of the literature, we make an observation about a global-national-local dialectic, or what is referred to by Mjimba and Nhamo (2020) as the “sustainable development-education nexus”. At the global level, the SDGs are a way to ground a particular vision of social change and development (Jamison & Meggan, 2021) in which education and HEIs are deeply implicated. At the level of the state, HEIs are ideal for integrating SDGs into sustainable development strategies (Ketlhoilwe et al., 2020). At the local level, a “reciprocal relationship between HEIs and their surrounding communities can be used to accelerate the implementation of SDG 4” (Shabalala & Ngcwangu, 2021). These levels must be in an appropriate relationship with each other to achieve the cross-sectoral collaboration needed for realising the SDGs (Unterhalter et al., 2021). In the case of SDGs related to HEIs, ignoring these institutions will impact the achievement of the SDGs at the national and thus the global level (Shava et al., 2020). Amongst their other aims, the SDGs point to the need for access to tertiary education, adequate resourcing and life-long learning and well-being. The following section looks at this through the lens of the South African case.

In South Africa, universities formed part of apartheid social engineering in that they were racially segregated, differentially resourced and oriented to upholding white domination (Rensburg, 2020). Historically white, English- and Afrikaans-medium universities were well-resourced, research-intensive centres of excellence with expansive networks and prestige while institutions designated for black (including coloured and Indian) South Africans suffered from staff and resource shortages and were primarily expected to train students as functionaries of the apartheid state such as teachers and bureaucrats (Heleta, 2016; Rensburg, 2020). Post-apartheid higher education policy aimed at redressing this imbalance through a series of interventions including rationalisation, institutional mergers and pursuing equity through demographic transformation. However, this resulted in uneven systematic reform of the higher education system which contributed to the creation of a three-tiered higher education system

with historically white, research-intensive universities at the top, new comprehensive universities in the middle and universities of technology - formerly Technikons - at the lowest level.

The growth in demand for massification of higher education can at least in part be explained by its construction as an aspirational lever and pathway to improved economic returns (Imenda, Kongolo & Grewal, 2004; Menon & Castrillon, 2019). For working-class students, higher education is an invaluable opportunity for social and economic mobility, even in cases, as described by Chetty & Pather (2015), where they opt into particular degree programmes as a last resort.

This is valuable context for situating student concerns around funding, fees and accessing the resources needed to successfully undertake tertiary study. The process of massification of higher education, which received a major boost following the demands of the student movement and protests in 2015/16 formed part of the drive to democratise access and improve equity through increasing the number of skilled graduates (Soudien, 2020). The protests had two major demands, free tertiary education and decolonising the curriculum. However, this took place in a context of limited financial resources for the system and a higher education funding model torn between the competing demands of equity and efficiency (Badat, 2010; Motala, 2020b).

The increasing demand for higher education due to globalisation and the rise of the knowledge economy is reflected in fast-growing higher education enrolments in sub-Saharan Africa, with a growth of 10 per cent annually between 2000 and 2010 (Wangenge-Ouma, 2010; Rensburg, Motala & David, 2016). Higher education has been shifting from an elite system to one promoting universal access. However, many challenges persist. These include inadequate access (particularly at secondary and tertiary levels), poor quality of provision, inefficiency (as reflected in high rates of dropout and repetition) and inequity in access and distribution of resources. In sub-Saharan Africa, low expenditure on higher education is a consequence of competing pressures on education budgets, severe resource constraints, pressure from sectors such as health and welfare and a lack of sufficient recognition by governments of the value of higher education for economic growth, social welfare and broad sustainable development (Pillay, 2008).

Statistics relating to the major indicators of access, efficiency, quality and resource allocation in tertiary education give valuable insights into the situation. Student enrolments

increased by 67 per cent between 2002 and 2016, from 450 000 to 950 000, with the major growth being in black African enrolment which reached 70 per cent of the total student population. In the same period, the number of permanent academic staff grew by 20 per cent with the staff–student ratio thus increasing to an alarming 1:55 from a previous 1:40 (Simkins, 2016). Cohort studies (CHE, 2013) show that fewer than half of students enter a three-year degree programme and, of those who do, up to 50 per cent take up to six years to graduate. Excluding those at UNISA, one in four students drops out before the second year of study. Only 35 per cent of the total intake, and 48 per cent of contact students, graduate within five years. Allowing for students taking longer than five years to graduate and those returning to the system after dropping out, it is estimated that some 55 per cent of an intake never graduate. Access, success and completion rates continue to be racially skewed, with white student completion rates on average 50 per cent higher than those of African students.

To maintain a competitive edge in a rapidly transforming knowledge economy, countries need to invest more in quality education. However, at below 1 per cent of GDP, historically South Africa has not sufficiently invested in higher education, nor has it reached its own target of 1 per cent expenditure on research and development, a figure that is well below international targets. External and internal efficiencies need also to be addressed, the former by improving the relevance of programmes and graduates to meet societal and labour market needs and the latter by improving how resources are allocated, within and across institutions, and by improving levels of degree completion.

Muller (2016) notes that, while the ostensible intention of the #FeesMustFall movement was to benefit poor youth, only 5 per cent of South Africans aged between 15 and 34 years are university students while 34 per cent are unemployed. A recent World Bank study (2021) which examined the effect of government spending and taxation on inequality noted that higher education was the least progressive element of social expenditure as it benefits only a very small part of the population. Unterhalter et al. (2018) raise the overarching question of who defines the public good and how. There appear to be two distinct ways in which higher education and the public good are conceptualised. Firstly, qualifications, knowledge production, innovation, development of the professional classes and expertise can be perceived as leading to particular economic, social, political or cultural manifestations of public good (Stiglitz, 1999; McMahon, 2009). Alternatively, the relationship between higher education and the public good can be seen as reducing prejudice and increasing democratisation, critical thinking and active citizenship (Marginson, 2011; Leibowitz, 2013; Locatelli, 2017).

Higher education in sub-Saharan Africa has moved from the establishment of flagship national universities in the post-independence period and intended to underpin a state bureaucracy (Teferra, 2016) to developmental universities with a commitment to indigenising knowledge and benefiting marginalised populations through to more recent tendencies towards marketisation of public institutions and encouragement of the private sector (Coleman, 1986; ADEA & AAU, 2004; Assié-Lumumba & CODESRIA, 2006; Mamdani, 2007; McCowan 2016). This relates to current debates which closely associate calls for decolonised education with effective resource allocation and equity. As Maringira & Gukurume (2018, p. 38) note, the #FeesMustFall movement created a space to articulate grievances about broader social and structural transformation as well as raise issues around being black and about racial inequality.

The broad intent of the SDGs is understood in the South African higher education context. Its application has been uneven, characterised by a resource constrained environment, escalating levels of inequality and poverty, and limited knowledge about the implementation of colonised curriculum at universities. In particular, university transformation has been markedly slower than in other social institutions although there have been efforts to transform their institutional cultures (Morreira, 2015) and epistemological traditions (Motala et al., 2021). Albareda-Tiana et al. (2018, p. 474) note that “transformation is a complex and long-term ambition. It must start by recognizing the SDG agenda calls for a paradigm shift in education. It is not only a matter of transforming institutional responsibility but also curriculum reorientation and teaching to better serve the needs of current and future generations.” There is space to sharpen research into the role of universities and decolonisation, and how SDGs can be used to transform universities which are themselves located in specific national and regional contexts.

### **Concluding comments**

Although highly contested, the SDGS have informed and shaped global education policy. In particular, SDG 4 has serious implications for the role of universities in implementing the SDGs. The history of the development of the SDGs shows that they emerged from a series of policy processes that involved various multilateral organisations such as the UN and international financial institutions including the World Bank. These policy processes were varied and uneven (Hulme & Scott, 2010), with the MDGs of 2000 setting the agenda for the launch of the SDGs in 2015. For education, this meant expansion from a narrow view of universal primary education enrolment to include a focus on quality and access to tertiary education. This shift reflected a broader change in the global development agenda from a rigid,

quantitative focus on targets in the 1980s to one that was more affective and qualitative. Scholars agree that universities do and can play a role in implementing the SDGs in the society in which they are located (Mawonde & Togo, 2019) although the specific form that this role can take is as yet poorly understood.

In the African context, as with universities in other parts of the world, Allais et al. (2020) have shown how narrow, individualistic measurements of success in education policy are not suitable for the African context. HEIs are linked not only to individual students, academics and institutional management but, given how universities contribute to the development of society by addressing historical inequalities of colonialism and racial capitalism (apartheid), are linked also to the less individualistic public good. In this, they are helping to achieve the aims of SDG 4 (Allais et al., 2020). The public good of universities is also evident in their links, not in isolation from but in co-construction with other sectors of society, to new African states as sites of national development (Tella & Motala, 2020; Mbembe, 2019).

Going forward, a priority has to be to identify how the decolonial turn in universities can play a role in achieving the aims of the SDGs and particularly of SDG 4. We are yet to address to Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2014) notion of difficult questions in higher education with weak answers to fully envision and implement what a decolonised and deracialised higher education system will be.

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