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## **NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: THE CASE OF A DEVELOPING NATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

“*Leave no one behind*” is the major goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Research shows that developing countries are lagging in their efforts to achieve SDGs. Since non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a significant role in combating discrimination and inequalities, especially in developing nations, this study seeks to identify the focus of NGOs in South Africa in achieving SDGs. This study took a non-empirical approach by employing a literature review and desktop study to achieve the study objectives. The findings of this study review that most NGOs are focused on goals 3, 10, and 17, and there is still a need for more effort on goals 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, & 16 in achieving SDGs. It is recommended that NGOs need to widen their scope of operations to help developing nations achieve the SDGs by 2030.

**Keywords:** NGOs, SDGs, Developing nations.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The World Bank estimates that nearly 15% of all international development aid is handled through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), indicating their growing influence on global affairs (Leverty, 2008). In both the developed and developing world, NGOs play an increasingly important role (Burger & Owens, 2010; Choto et al., 2020; United Nations, 2018). What started as an anti-slavery movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century primarily focused on humanitarian aid (Korey, 1998; Martens, 2010), NGOs now serve in various socio-economic and environmental roles (Baglioni et al., 2017; Choto et al., 2019; Choto et al., 2020). Also, Martens (2010) posited that nowadays, NGOs are involved in all performances, processes, and policy fields of international relations. Not only have NGOs become policy lobbyists, but their contribution to pro-poor initiatives has increased significantly over the years (Burger & Owens, 2010).

In recent years, NGOs have devised novel ways to address unmet societal needs (Baglioni et al., 2017; Boateng et al., 2016). Notably, the actions of NGOs have been attributed to social innovation, which is the “*distinctive and effective response to address unmet needs motivated by a social purpose which enhances social assets and capabilities*” (Baglioni et al., 2017). The value of NGOs in community development should not be underestimated (Boateng et al., 2016; Burger

& Owens, 2010). Over the past decades, NGOs have been at the forefront of eradicating poverty, reducing unemployment, eliminating social exclusions, and improving education levels, among others (Santos et al., 2021). Furthermore, Choto et al. (2020) asserted that NGOs help to strengthen social systems to improve the provision of goods and services. Significantly, NGOs serve relevant societal functions, especially in areas with limited public intervention (Baglioni et al., 2017; Choto et al., 2019).

Within the United Nations (UN), the role of NGOs is to constitute several activities such as awareness raising, policy advocacy, development education, participation in intergovernmental processes, joint operational projects, information dissemination, intergovernmental processes and the contribution of technical expertise and services (UN, 2018). This interworking between NGOs and the UN began in 1945 when the UN was formed (Alger, 2002; UN, 2018), and the provisions of NGOs role in UN activities are articulated in Article 71 of the UN Charter (UN, 2018). According to Martens (2010), “*NGOs are formal independent societal organisations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level*”. They do not have any state members but consist of private individuals and groups with an agenda for progressive change or universal rights (Martens, 2010).

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the transformative promise is “*to leave no one behind*.” The UN Member States resolved to eliminate poverty in all manifestations, end discrimination and exclusion, and lessen inequalities and vulnerabilities that keep people behind and limit their potential as human beings (UN, 2015; UN, 2018). However, most developing nations are still lagging in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Rifai, 2021). The main challenges of sustainable development in developing nations include the lack of the necessary infrastructure to support policy reforms, high levels of inequalities as compared to developed nations, burgeoning socio-economic and political instabilities, and poor governance (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Rifai, 2021; Sarvajayakesavalu, 2015; Tucho & Kumsa, 2020). With the above background in mind, the primary objective of this study is to determine the focus of South African NGOs in achieving SDGs. As established already, NGOs’ role is situated within the frames of UN goals, but the extent to which NGOs in South Africa are aligned with these goals has not been fully established. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: (2) Research Design and Methodology, (3) What are Non-Governmental Organisations? (4) Non-Governmental Organisations in Developing nations, (5) Findings, and (6) Discussion and Conclusion.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This study adopted a non-empirical approach that relied on a literature review and secondary data. Peer-reviewed journal articles were sourced from Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and Web of Science. Also, reports and book chapters were used in this study. Data for the NGOs was gathered from NGO Advisor website (<https://ngoadvisor.co.za/directory/>), with a database of 90 South African NGOs. They provide opportunities for NGOs to find donors and as well donors to find suitable NGOs to support. The database was purposively chosen, and 6 NGOs were excluded from the study as the researcher could not find their website or social media handles. Thus, a total of 84 NGOs were used in this study. To determine whether the efforts of the NGOs align with the SDGs,

the researchers first created a checklist for each SDG, then browsed each NGO's website or social media profile focusing on *vision, mission, goals, and any other information about the NGO*, to determine which of its efforts align to which SDGs. To strengthen the coding used in this study, member checking was employed. This allowed other research collaborators to check the validity and accuracy of the data gathered.

## **What are Non-Governmental Organisations?**

The conceptualisation of NGO definition varies among practitioners and scholars. Martens (2010) denotes that the term NGO has been criticised in literature for its structural basis of "government" versus "non-governmental." For example, in China, NGOs are often associated with anti-government. More recently, NGOs have also been seen as a mode of new colonialism, in which previous colonisers of developing nations effect control over their former colony (Shava, 2019). Despite the conflicting ideologies in this phenomenon, NGOs play a critical role in the social and economic development in developing nations (Arhin et al., 2018; Burger & Owens, 2010; Jakia et al., 2020; Martens, 2010). Article 71 of the United Nations Charter coined the term "NGO." NGOs' roles within the United Nations are governed by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The article states that "*the Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultations with the Members of the United Nations concerned*" (Martens, 2010). Moreover, NGOs are formal and independent social-driven organisations whose primary aim is to promote common goals for all (Arhin et al., 2018; Asogwa et al., 2021; Jakia et al., 2020; Martens, 2010). They are characterised as voluntary, not-for-profit, private, and self-governing entities that advance the cause of disadvantaged people. These are socio-economic development organisations that help to empower the less-privileged (Jakia et al., 2020; Shava, 2019).

## **Non-Governmental Organisations in Developing Nations**

NGOs' ability to make transformative and revolutionary contributions within developing nations is being increasingly acknowledged in developing nations. Their active role in the grassroots level tremendously fast-tracks the improvement of the quality of life (Asogwa et al., 2021; Jakia et al., 2020; Shava, 2019). In South Africa, most NGOs emerged to address the inequalities that were caused by apartheid. Pre-1994, marginalisation and segregation had widened, which led to the impoverishment of the underprivileged groups (Choto et al., 2020). Currently, there are vast numbers of NGOs serving different areas of need within communities in developing countries (Choto et al., 2020; Shava, 2019). NGOs have become "sweethearts" of socio-economic development in the most vulnerable communities. In addition, NGOs promote human rights and democracy; they support marginalised communities by promoting socio-economic participation, and their efforts also help to hold public actors accountable in their service to civil society (Shava, 2019).

As developing nations are still far in their steps to achieve the 2030 SDGs, NGOs' roles are fundamental. Most NGO activities can be linked to the 17 SDGs (Asogwa et al., 2021; Jakia et al.,

2020; Sarvajayakesavalu, 2015; Shava, 2019). Most developing nations are plagued with social, economic, and political instabilities, and they are struggling to balance economic growth while fighting several national ills (Jakia et al., 2020; Sarvajayakesavalu, 2015). However, understanding the efforts of NGOs as aligned to SDGs is vital as it helps identify existing gaps for social entrepreneurs. Currently, there are limited studies that juxtapose the roles of NGOs versus SDGs.

## Findings

Among the 84 NGOs, Figure 5.1 illustrates the percentage of NGOs per province in South Africa. It is evident that most NGOs are in Gauteng (52%), followed by Western Cape with 21%. Mpumalanga has the least number of NGOs (1%). Free State and Limpopo had 4%, while Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal had 12% and 6% respectively.

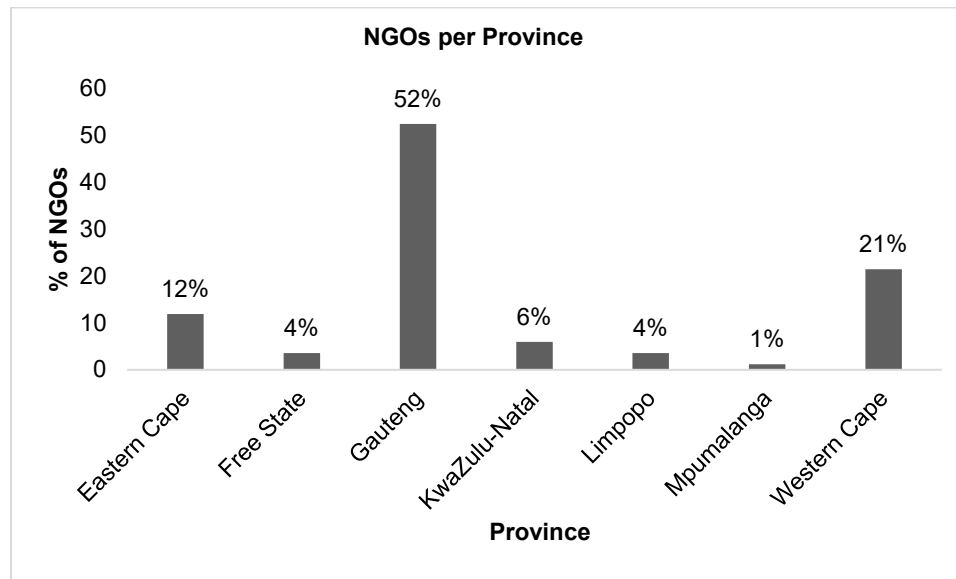
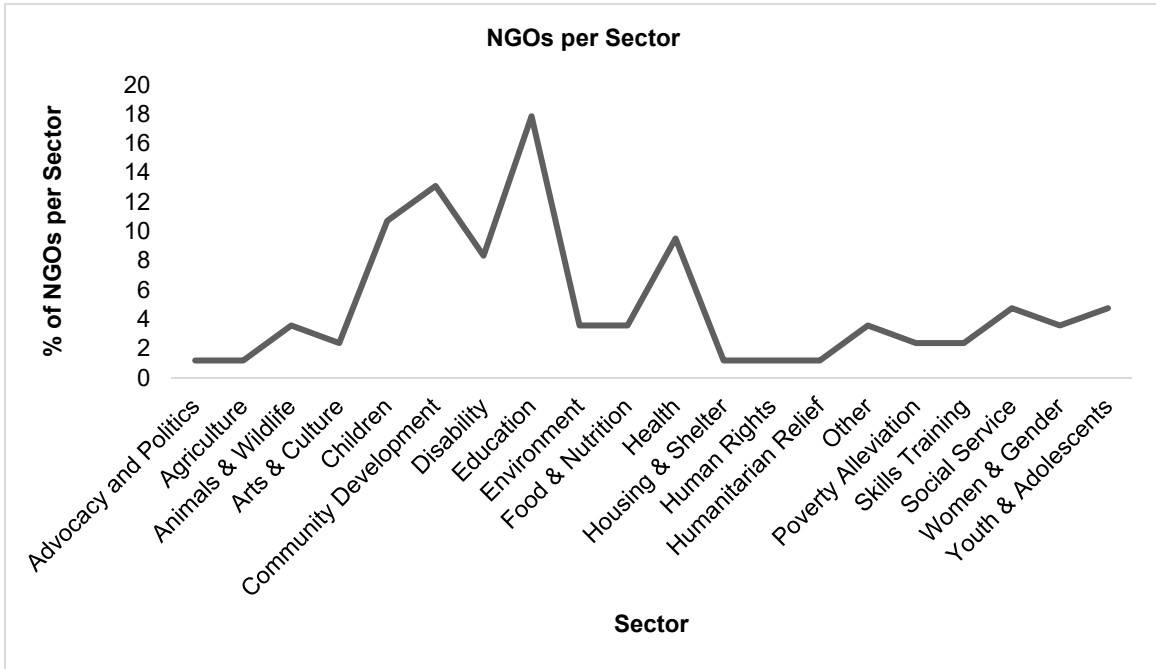
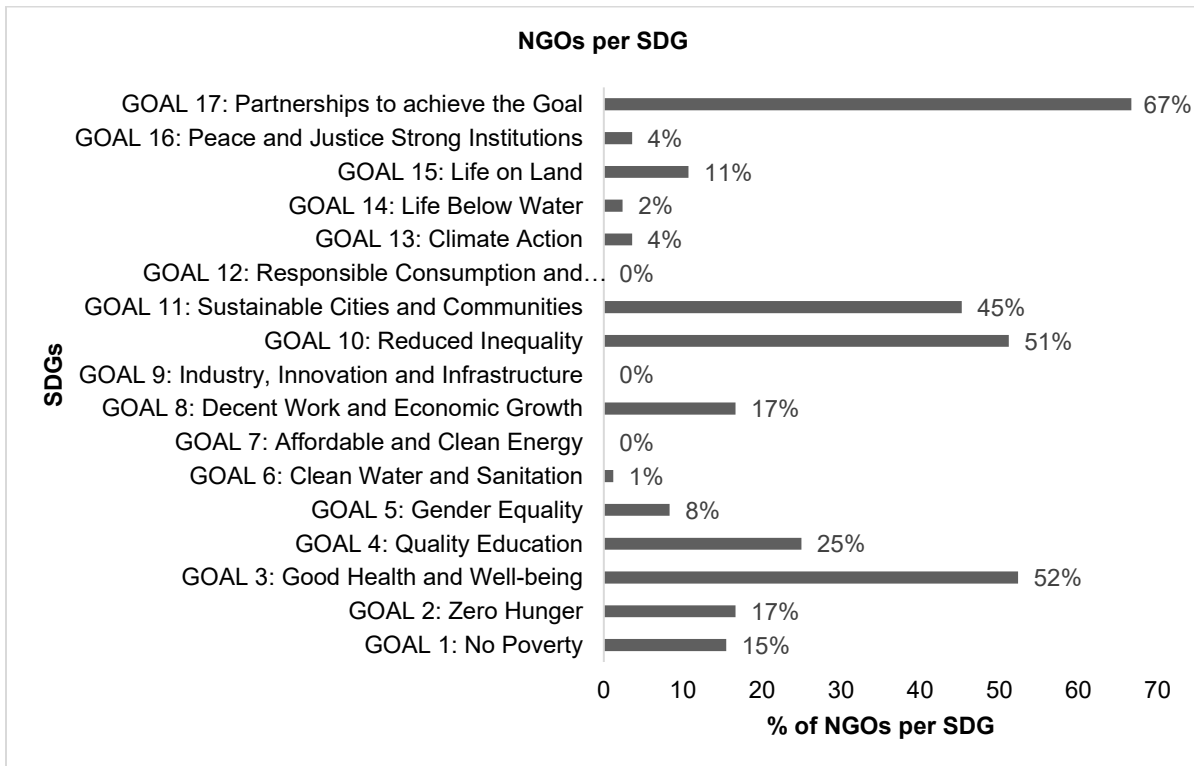


Figure 5.1: NGOs per Province

Moving on, Figure 5.2 highlights the number of NGOs per sector. From the data gathered, NGOs aligned to education (18%) had the greatest number of NGOs followed by community development (13%). Advocacy and politics, agriculture, housing and shelter, human rights, and humanitarian relief sectors had the least number of NGOs. Each of these sectors had only 1% of NGOs focusing on them. The disability and child sectors had a relatively high number of NGOs, with 8% and 11% of NGOs respectively.



**Figure 5.2: NGOs per Sector**



**Figure 5.3: NGOs per SDG**

Figure 5.3 represents each SDG versus NGOs. As shown, most NGOs are focused on Goal 17 (Partnerships to Achieve the Goal) with 67% followed by Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) with 52% and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality) with 51%. Hence, partnering with NGOs is considered effective. Among the 84 NGOs used in this study, Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) have 0% of NGOs, followed by Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) with 1%.

- Below, is a discussion of each SDG in detail: Goal 1: No Poverty. As shown in Figure 5.3, there are 15% of NGOs whose focus is on ending poverty in South Africa. According to the UN (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic hampered most of the efforts toward poverty reduction. In 2018, about 656 million people were living on less than \$1.90 a day, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number has increased to 749 million. To achieve this goal by 2030, developing countries will need innovative pathways for pro-poor growth.
- Goal 2: Zero Hunger; focused on ending global food security. Due to climate-related shocks, widening inequalities and rising conflicts, global food supplies have been affected. In 2021, over 828 million people suffered hunger (UN, 2022). In this study, about 17% of NGOs have efforts tailored to end hunger in South Africa.
- Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being. About 52% of NGOs focus on the good health and well-being of people in South Africa. Among others, the core areas for this goal are immunisation coverage, reproductive, maternal, childbirth, treatment of communicable diseases and mental health issues (UN, 2022). Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these efforts have been impacted. The pandemic disrupted the provision of essential health services, triggered the rise in the prevalence of anxiety and depression, and reduced global life expectancy (UN, 2022).
- Goal 4: Quality Education. This goal is focused on ensuring access to education for all and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. There are 25% of NGOs with an education focus. As noted by the UN (2022), the pandemic disrupted education systems across the globe; especially in developing. NGO efforts support and help underprivileged communities with access to primary and secondary school education. Some NGOs' efforts are centred on the provision of bursaries.
- Goal 5: Gender Equality; aimed at achieving equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Still, UN members are not on track to achieving this goal (UN, 2022). This study finds that 8% of NGOs are focused on this goal. More specifically, NGOs are providing shelter and counselling to abused women. There are also other NGOs training women in various vocational trades and raising awareness against gender-based violence (GBV).
- Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. Ensuring the availability and sustainability of water supply and sanitation is a concern for UN members. The management of safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene are essential to human health (UN, 2022). Only 1% of NGOs are focused on this goal.
- Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy. It was found that none of the NGOs in this study had a focus on affordable and clean energy. According to the UN (2022), millions of people still do not have access to electricity and over 2.4 billion people are at health risk due to a lack of access to clean cooking solutions.

- Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. Progress towards work for all has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing countries are still struggling with high unemployment rates and weak economic growth. This study found that 17% of NGOs focus on goal 8, such as helping graduates with work readiness.
- Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure. None of the NGOs had a focus on goal 9. Technological innovations, industrialisation and resilient infrastructure are important to achieve SDG goals. Most developing countries have poor infrastructure and were severely affected by the pandemic.
- Goal 10: Reduced Inequality. From the findings, 51% of NGOs focus on reducing inequalities. Developing countries are still behind in their efforts to achieve this goal. The pandemic has also magnified systematic and structural discrimination. There are widening disparities in less developed countries (UN, 2022).
- Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. More than half of the global population lives in cities. Cities are the main contributors to GDP and are economic growth drivers. However, over 70% of greenhouse gas emissions are from cities. This study found that 45% of NGOs focus on goal 11.
- Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. The triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss are a result of unsustainable patterns of consumption. Efforts towards ensuring the sustainability of the livelihoods of future and current generations are vital. Among the NGOs surveyed in this study, none of them has made efforts toward the achievement of this goal.
- Goal 13: Climate Action. Only 4% of NGOs focus on this goal. Increased floods, droughts, and heatwaves caused by climate change are affecting billions of people across the globe and causing irreversible changes in the global ecosystems (UN, 2022). There is a need for an increased effort toward reducing the impact of greenhouse gases in both developing and developed countries.
- Goal 14: Life Below Water. Figure 5.3 highlights that only 2% of NGOs focus on goal 14. There is a need to raise awareness and training in developing nations about protecting oceans and seas. UN members are committed to conservation and the sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources. Humans are endangering the planet's ecosystem, and this is inevitably affecting billions of people's livelihoods (UN, 2022).
- Goal 15: Life on Land. In developing nations, forests continue to shrink due to agricultural expansion. It is common knowledge that biodiversity and healthy ecosystems are a source of water, food, medicine, and shelter. They also help to clear water and air. Nevertheless, human activities have put 40,000 species at risk of extinction. Hence, NGO efforts toward ensuring the preservation of life on land is critical. The findings in this study show that only 11% of NGOs focus on this goal.
- Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This goal is aimed at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and the provision of justice for all, and the building of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Notably, the plea for peace across the globe is growing louder. In 2021, the UN recorded about 13,842 deaths associated with armed conflicts. In this study, only 4% of NGOs are linked to this goal.

- Goal 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal. In this study, about 67% of NGOs' efforts are linked to goal 17. These are partnerships with various private individuals, groups or institutions to achieve any SDG. Most developing nations are still struggling to recover from the pandemic, as they are plagued by an increase in inflation and interest rates and debt burdens. NGO's involvement and partnerships in helping developing nations like South Africa to achieve their SDGs are essential.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows the roles of NGOs in South Africa as linked to the SDGs. Only goals 3, 10, and 17 have over 50% attention from the NGOs, and goals 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, & 16 have less than 10% of NGOs focusing on these goals. This shows that there is still a gap for social entrepreneurs to fill. More effort is needed in support of the achievement of SDG goals by NGOs.

- Managerial Implications: There is a need to encourage and support the efforts of the NGOs as they assist with socio-economic development in developing nations. NGOs should use various strategies to source funding to expand their efforts in assisting underprivileged communities. NGOs should also be encouraged to align their efforts with the SDGs.
- Avenues for Further Research: An empirical study can be carried out to gather quantitative data to validate the current study. Another study can be conducted qualitatively to analyse NGOs' understanding of SDGs and their role in achieving these goals.

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