



Veritatis Gaudium:
Multidisciplinary Journal of Postgraduate Studies

College of Postgraduate Studies,
Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria

ISSN: 3043 - 5285

Volume 1, Number 5, September, 2026

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.17243.12322

**THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND
THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN AFRICA**

Otegbu Isaac Odu, PhD; Adidi Timothy Dokpesi, PhD; Sule, Abraham Bamidele
Veritas University, Abuja
adidit@veritas.edu.ng

Abstract

It is a generally accepted fact that public policies, as their name suggests, are targeted at members of the public, and as such, the people necessarily have to be the agents, means, and end of policies. In view of this truism, policies like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which are poised to 'achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people and the world by 2030', require the participation of all stakeholders across countries of the world. This can be made possible if a system that guarantees the active participation of the people is implemented and sustained. The study was exploratory and relied mostly on secondary data, which were analysed descriptively. Therefore, the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is realistic if democratic governance, which guarantees people's rights and creates an enabling environment for people to get actively and meaningfully involved in their own affairs, is implemented, promoted, and purposively sustained. Nigeria claims to practice democracy, but tenets like respect for people's inalienable rights, justice, accountability, transparency, etc., which are the hallmarks of democratic governance, are almost nonexistent. This paper therefore underscored the critical role of democracy in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria and advanced that the slide to democratic decline seriously threatens the realization of the UNSDGs by African countries. The paper therefore recommended the entrenchment of democratic institutions, tenets, and principles in order to guarantee wide participation by the majority of the citizenry.

Keywords: Democracy, Participation, Development, Goals, Poverty

Introduction

The quest for socio-economic and political development by nations has been a recurring phenomenon globally since the dawn of human existence. Individuals, groups, and states desirous of transiting

from one (usually lower and undesirable) state to a more advanced and desirable state are known to have evolved strategies and programmes aimed at the achievement of the clearly stated goals. Having evolved these strategies and programmes, conscious efforts were made by all and sundry, and critical stakeholders were mobilized and tasked with the responsibility of realizing the stated goals.

It is necessary to point out that the key to the realization of set goals by countries is a system of government that guarantees individual rights and liberties and creates a favourable environment where individual citizens productively participate in governance. Democracy, which is widely regarded as the best form of government across the world, typifies this governmental system. It is therefore posited in this study that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), which are the global community's vision for development and eradication of the ills that bedevil humanity, are realizable when participatory democracy is emplaced, sustained, and allowed to blossom in countries (Kanu et al., 2025; Anthony & Michael, 2026). This assertion is in view of the fact that democracy allows for popular participation in decision-making mechanisms, a key requirement for the realization of the UNSCGs.

However, in spite of the contemporary wave of democratization across countries in the world, it is a truism that many countries now grapple with daunting challenges to the smooth running of democratic governance, leading to an upsurge in autocratic rule. This decline in democracy has been described using different concepts like democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Karolewski, 2021), democratic rollback (Diamond, 2008), democratic decline (Salih, 2021), democratic reversal (Andersen, 2019), democratic erosion (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022; Silva-Leander, 2021), democratic recession (Diamond, 2015; Loanda, 2010; Zamfir, 2021) and democratic decay (Daly, 2016).

This state of decline of democracy is evident in Africa, where there appears to be a steady return to illiberal democracy. A key feature of the state of democracy in Africa is the fragility of democratic regimes and the high share of hybrid regimes that combine democratic features (e.g., holding periodic elections) and autocratic ones (e.g., control over the judiciary and the mass media by the Executive Branch of government, or executive control over the legislative branch). This has been aptly captured by the IDEA's 2019 State of Democracy Report, which stated that 'Africa is home to more than three-quarters of the world's fragile democracies, which are countries that transitioned to democracy after 1975, but then experienced a partial (to hybrid) or full democratic breakdown to non-democracy. More than half of Africa's democracies can be considered weak democracies, with a low performance on at least one of their democratic attributes.

It is against this backdrop that this study set out to examine this state of democratic decline in Africa and argue that a continuous state of democratic breakdown in Africa is a serious threat to the realization of the UNSDGs.

Statement of the Problem

The level of democracy in 2020 is similar to that of 1990, with a growing rate of the incidence of autocratic rule found in 87 countries, 68 per cent of the world population (Alizada et al., 2021, cited in Akinyetun, 2021). Despite recording the transition of more than 90 countries to democracy since 1974 and a surge in democratic states, democracy has now become marred by electoral fraud, violence, bad governance, social divisions, election rigging, abusive security forces, and a predatory elite (Diamond, 2008), leading to a decline in democracy (Diamond, 2015:142). This global occurrence of democratic recession might be contestable, as noted by Anderson (2019), but there is no denying that a relapse to illiberal democracy and authoritarianism is evident in Africa. For example, between 2019 and 2025, Africa witnessed a total of nine military coups in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan, and Gabon. Others, like Nigeria, which claims to be operating a democracy, are characterized by bad governance and failing democratic

institutions, all of which represent a significant setback to democratic consolidation and threats to the realization of the UNSDGs.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the thrust of the UNSDGs?
2. How does democratic recession threaten the successful realization of the UNSDGs in Africa?
3. How can African countries address the challenge of democratic recession?

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to discuss the state of democratic breakdown in Africa as a threat to the realization of the UNSDGs. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the thrust of the UNSDGs.
2. Discuss how democratic recession threatens the successful realization of the UNSDGs in Africa.
3. Suggest how African countries can address the challenge of democratic recession.

Literature Review

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at a Glance

The world has witnessed economic growth and development such that while there are billions of people living in improved longevity with higher levels of wellbeing, there still exists a situation where the poorest of the poor in the global south continue the daily fight for survival, lacking basic levels of nutrition, health care, shelter, or sanitation. As a result of this, among others, the idea of sustainable development has evolved. It represents the shared, holistic, and long-term vision that countries have agreed upon to be the best path forward for improving the lives of people everywhere. Sustainable development promotes prosperity and economic opportunity, greater social well-being, and protection of the environment.

The *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), which were in place *from 2000 to 2015*, were succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In September 2000, *189 nations' leaders* convened at the United Nations headquarters in New York to sign the historic Millennium Declaration. As a result, *a worldwide alliance of nations and development partners* was formed with *the aim of accomplishing the eight voluntary Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015*. The world and countries have to keep up their efforts to fully accomplish the MDGs and improve upon them by taking on new challenges when the MDG timeframe concluded in 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) *and the Post-2015 Development Agenda* were developed through a multi-stakeholder, inclusive process that promoted openness and full involvement. It is to be noted that key elements of both the MDGs and SDGs are the improvement in the lives of people everywhere, irrespective of tribe, religion, or race (emphasis ours), and comprehensive participation by all and sundry.

The 17 Goals

The SDGs as outlined by the UN include: No Poverty; Zero Hunger; Good Health and Well-being; Quality Education; Gender Equality; Clean Water and Sanitation; Affordable and Clean Energy; Decent Work and Economic Growth; Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; Reduced Inequalities; Sustainable Cities and Communities; Responsible Consumption and Production; Climate Action; Life Below Water, Life on Land; Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; and Partnerships for the Goals. These SDGs call for urgent action from all people from all over the world. This call is for the world to collaborate to end the most pressing issues militating against humanity. This can only be feasible if the political atmosphere in individual countries is conducive to the involvement and participation of all citizens. This is where democracy comes into play, and by democracy, we refer to liberal or participatory democracy.

Conceptually and etymologically speaking, democracy implies the power of the people to rule. It is a system where the people exercise governing power through their representatives, who are themselves elected periodically. Democracy consists of four basic elements, one of which is the active participation or involvement of the entire citizenry in politics and civic life. Therefore, if democracy is to be participatory and if it is to be seen to be working, citizens necessarily must be allowed to actively participate and exercise their rights. The Africa Center (2024) avers that contemporary history has witnessed the prevalence of democratic governance. In the Center's position, this system of government is globally regarded as the most acceptable standard for the organization and administration of the modern state system. In their view, as far as countries of the global South are concerned, the mechanisms of world economic as well as geopolitical wealth have a tendency to favor states that adhere strictly to democratic principles and tenets that uphold civil liberties, equality of all citizens, and regard for periodic free and fair elections.

The Africa Center went on to posit that partly due to the complex state of most post-colonial and post-independence unions and associations, in addition to the quasi-autonomous structure of the post-colonial states, many African states appear to be practicing democracy in view of the existence of political parties and conduct of periodic elections but fail largely to commit themselves to strengthening political institutions that support the entrenchment of democracy. Recent developments regarding the resurgence of military coups and consequent overthrow of civilian administrations have undermined the stability and viability of democratic institutions in Africa. The cases of successive military interventions in countries like Niger, Gabon, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, and Guinea, and the controversial election results in other countries like Nigeria and Kenya, tend to undermine and frustrate the practice of participatory democracy on the African continent.

Coulibaly (2024) observed that currently, when the global community is witnessing modern socio-political development, which is basically participatory democracy, Africa, in his view, is rather regressing in a manner that depicts pre-democracy upheavals. He went on to note that the history of democracy in Africa, right from the independence period in the 1960s, has seen a varying degree of trajectories. While a few states in Africa, like those of the Maghreb, which, though not democracies yet, are relatively politically stable, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced various eras of democracy mixed with unique administrations and authoritarian regimes. Coulibaly posited that despite this, democracy remains a major prerequisite for the sustainable development of the African continent.

Chabal summarized the state of democracy in Africa in the following assertions. First, he avers that even though it looks like democracy is taking root in Africa, events on the ground indicate that the entire democratization process on the continent is, at best, convoluted. Secondly, Chabal noted that there are recurring arguments that multi-party elections conducted so far are either stage-managed or manipulated by incumbent authorities. On a third note, Chabal opines that there exists a certainty concerning the fact that administrations which were democratically elected are bent on subverting any attempt at political liberalization by administering state affairs in a manner that successive administrations, like the previous one-party governments, did. Fourthly, he pointed out that there are some limitations to the actual nature of democratic operations of multi-party systems, notable among which is that extant systems are intolerant of opposition forces. On a final note, Chabal posited that there is an undisputed fact that, as elections have been unable to result in genuine improvements in standards of living, African citizens have gradually lost faith in democracy.

Methodology

The study relied on secondary sources of data *in order to* adequately address the defined research problem and objectives. The study made use of pre-existing data from reliable, peer-reviewed sources, including government reports, scholarly works, and journal articles. These include journal articles, pertinent scholarly publications, and reports from the United Nations, among others. The data collected were analysed data was analyzed compiled, and presented descriptively.

Discussion

It is noted that African countries made strides towards implementing democratic rule in the early years of independence. However, of note is the wave of democratization witnessed in the early 1990s. This wave of democratization in Africa is recorded to have started in the Benin Republic in 1990 when some tertiary institution students and a segment of civil society organizations staged a public demonstration and compelled the then President Mathieu Kérékou to convene a sovereign national conference. These phenomena spilled over rapidly to other neighbouring states like Guinea, Togo, Mali, and Niger, which also convened sovereign national conferences between 1990 and 1993. For instance, Côte d'Ivoire saw the government making amendments to its Constitution in order to accommodate opposition, while the world saw the Ghanaian authority implementing multiparty democracy (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021, cited in Akinyetun, 2022).

This wind of democracy was replicated in countries like Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cape Verde, among others, such that as the world entered the 21st century, African states had embraced a transition to democratic governance and constitutionalism. In spite of this commendable and notable stride towards political development and the accompanying benefits, many African countries have of late experienced a disturbing trend towards a decline in democracy, a situation where democracy deteriorates while authoritarian rule is on the steady rise (Zamfir, 2021). African countries now face the challenge of an ugly trend which Akinyetun (2022, p. 5) describes as democratic recession, a situation where the state is unable to guarantee democratic precepts such as rule of law, free and fair elections, state legitimacy, minority rights, fundamental human rights, and press freedom.

Furthermore, Salih (2021, p. 6) posits that this state of democracy implies that:

“State institutions represented by governments have become dysfunctional, defined by cronyism and corrupt politicians supported by the equally corrupt political elite. This imprisonment of state institutions is reinforced by non-responsive elected representatives, who, in many cases, side with those who have overtaken the state rather than the people who elected them. In a sense, the decline of democracy is a symptom of the crisis of state legitimacy.”

In a similar vein, Bermeo (2016) has categorized the democratic recession witnessed in Africa and Nigeria into two viz: election manipulation and executive aggrandizement. In his view, election manipulation pertains to pre-election malpractices like restriction in access, lack of tolerance for opposition parties, intimidation, and manipulation of voter registration, usually perpetrated by incumbent leaders in order to guarantee victory at the polls. For him, executive aggrandizement refers to the gradual removal of checks on executive power as well as the acquisition of overbearing power due to the sit-tight syndrome. Additionally, Anderson (2019), in a similar position, advanced that democratic backsliding can be subcategorized into two types, i.e., electoral and liberal backsliding. In the first case, there is the targeting of electoral mechanisms by deliberately manipulating free and fair elections and silencing opposition forces, while in the second case, parliamentary and judicial bodies are targeted by the incumbent.

In order to have a comprehensive idea of democratic recession and of the process, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) further elaborated by effectively capturing an approach that portrays the process of recession and which aptly describes the situation in Nigeria and Africa in Table 1 below. This process starts with targeting the umpires or institutions of the state, like the judicial arm of government, through a craftily orchestrated machinery of bribery and/or impeachment. Moving from there, incumbent leaders identify or target members of the opposition and subject them to blackmail or orchestrated charges. The last step in this process is a subtle manipulation of extant rules and regulations for personal gains. Nigeria's political history is replete with such instances.

Table 1: Model of Democratic Backsliding

Step	Goal	Method
Step 1 Target referees of the state The judiciary, law enforcement, tax, and regulation agencies, etc.	Ensure the loyalty of the institutions, so they can protect the government and attack opponents.	- Blackmail or bribery - Replace civil servants with loyalists - Impeach Judges - Court Packing - Create new institutions
Step 2 Targets opponents of the government. Political opponents, critical media, business leaders etc.	To demoralize and weaken the opposition, and to dissuade criticism of the government	- Bribery/blackmail - Charge opponents with invented or exaggerated criminal activity
Step 3 Change the rules of governing Legislation, constitution, and electoral system	Ensure the continued political dominance of the governmental political party	- Gerrymandering - Alter the electoral rules - Introduce the legislature to favour the ruling party

Source: Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018, cited in Akinyetun, 2022, p. 6)

Arising from the foregoing, it is clear that though African countries have, over the years, made conscious efforts and palpable advancements towards instituting democratic governance and jettisoning autocratic rule in all its forms to attain what Tar (2010) described as second independence. However, recent trends have shown a relapse to dictatorship and autocratic rule, thereby making Africans victims of a truncated march towards participatory democracy. This has been manifested variously through the recurring prevalence of weak civil society and organizations, weak economies, absence of vibrant opposition, undemocratic political culture, identity-based politics, resurgence of military coups, etc. (Tar, 2010). These are pointers to the fact that the achievement of the SDGs in Africa may as well amount to an exercise in futility or a wild goose chase.

In addition to the above, democracy in Africa is seen here as having a history full of trajectories. Even though the African continent has various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), they are usually not permitted to participate actively in politics. Furthermore, in Africa, there are numerous other professional organizations, all of which are expected to aggregate and articulate members' aspirations. There are also many more churches and religious organizations, but those who venture into politics attempt that at their own peril because the issue of separation of religion from state affairs is strictly adhered to. It is also worthy of note that African peasant farmers and workers are more dissatisfied and aggrieved even with the operation of democracy and democratic governance today than before. The reason is not far-fetched; Africans have in times past and under several successive regimes borne the hardships of the aftermath of the Structural Adjustment Programmes implemented. Despite this, the people's unions, which were expected to aggregate and articulate the cause of their welfare, have been weakened in numerous African countries.

Another crucial factor that reveals the state of democracy in Africa and why the realization of the UNSDGs is threatened is the fact that a close look at democracy in Africa depicts the important influence that leaders and political parties have in shaping people's ideas and opinions. A key feature of African democracy, which distinguishes it from modern-day participatory democracy, is the susceptibility of citizens' opinions to leaders' whims and prejudices. There is consequently an

increasing disconnection between the leaders and the led. This no doubt has the tendency to frustrate the realization of the SDGs in Africa.

The gradual erosion of civic involvement in African states *is* mostly explained by *the* aforementioned, which has led *to a* scenario *where* people are dissatisfied with how successfully policies have fulfilled public hopes and aspirations. Although democracy is popularly supported, African citizens are not happy with how it operates (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004). African democracies today are defined by the general dictatorial behavior of political leaders and the *ruling party*, which frequently leads to bloodshed, political protest, violent revolution, and terrorism. It should be mentioned that *African democracies* lack *rights and qualities*, which are the two main characteristics of modern democracies. This again goes to underscore the seeming futility of the UNSDGs in Africa.

Conclusion

The aforementioned makes it evident that, to achieve what academics have referred to as “*second independence*,” African nations *have, over time, made* deliberate *efforts and* noticeable progress toward establishing *democratic* government and giving up authoritarian control in all of its manifestations. Africans are victims of a shortened *march towards participatory democracy*; nevertheless, current patterns indicate *a return to* authoritarianism and *autocratic* governance. Poor civil society and organizations, poor economies, a lack of active opposition, an undemocratic political culture, identity-based politics, a revival of military coups, etc., are some of the ways that this has shown up. These indicate that achieving the SDGs in Africa might as well be an exercise in futility.

Recommendations

- i. African citizens should demand the entrenchment of a more inclusive and participatory democracy.
- ii. This study therefore recommends the entrenchment of democratic institutions, tenets, and principles to guarantee wide participation by the majority of the citizenry.

References

- Akinyetun, T.S. (2022). The State of Democracy in Africa: Democratic Decline or Autocracy? *Političke Perspektive*, 12 (2),
- Anderson, D. (2019). Comparative democratization and democratic backsliding: The case for a historical-institutional approach. *Comparative Politics*, 51(4), 645–663.
- Anthony, Kanu Ikechukwu & Michael, Pilani Paul (2026). Role of the African Union in Addressing Global Challenges Through the Lens of Genesis (11:1-9): Theological and Socio-Political Insights. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*, VOL. 17, No. 1, May 2026, pp. 536-552. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.17.1.27>
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19.
- Chabal, P. (1998). “A few considerations on democracy in Africa.” *International Affairs*, 72(2) 289-303
- Coulibaly, S. (2024). “The Strange Trajectory of the Democratization Process in Africa,” available at <https://www.civicus.org/media/Democracy-in-Africa.pdf>, accessed on 3 March, 2026
- Diamond, L. (2008). The democratic rollback: The resurgence of the predatory state. *Foreign Affairs*, 87(2), 36–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20032579>
- Diamond, L. (2015). Facing up to the democratic recession. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 141–155
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2021). *Democratic backsliding in West Africa: Nature, causes, remedies*. Kofi Annan Foundation. <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/app/uploads/2021/11/Democratic-backsliding-in-West-Africa-Nature-causes-remedies-Nov-2021.pdf>

- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (Ed.). (2004). *Democratic Reform in Africa: The Quality of Progress*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Hartmann, H., & Thiery, P. (2022). *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index 2022*. https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BTI_2022_Global_Findings_EN.pdf
- International IDEA (2019), *The Global State of Democracy 2019 Report: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise*.
- Kanu, I. A., Pilani, M. P., & Louis, N. K. (2025). African Union's Peace and Integration Initiatives in the Light of Ecclesiastes (4: 12): Intersection of Politics and Biblical Wisdom. *Journal of African Union Studies*, 14(3), 161-179.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017a). Igwebuiké as the hermeneutic of individuality and communality in African ontology. *Nasara Journal of Philosophy*, 2(1), 162–179.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017b). Igwebuiké and the question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(1), 103–110.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017c). Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African ethic of reciprocity. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(2), 153–160.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017d). Igwebuiké philosophy and the issue of national development. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(6), 16–50.
- Kanu, I. A. (2017e). Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African philosophy of inclusive leadership. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(7), 165–183.
- Karolewski, I. P. (2021). Towards a political theory of democratic backsliding? Generalising the East Central European experience. In Lorenz, A. & Anders, L., *Illiberal trends and anti-EU politics in East Central Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-54674-8
- Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. UK: Penguin Random House. <https://www.eui.eu/Documents/DepartmentsCentres/SPS/ResearchAnd-Teaching/How-Democracies-Die.pdf>
- Loada, A. (2010). Constitutional challenges and lessons from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Niger. In Gbesan, G. *Democratic recession in West Africa: Challenges to revivalism*. Dakar: Open Society Initiative for West Africa
- Salih, M. (2021). Africa and the decline of the democracy debate. *Hungarian Journal of African Studies*, 15(4), 5–15.
- Silva-Leander, A. (2021). *The global state of democracy 2021: Building resilience in a pandemic era*. Strömsborg: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. https://www.idea.int/gsod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_0.pdf
- Tar, U. (2010). The challenges of democracy and democratisation in Africa and the Middle East. *Information, Society and Justice*, 3(2), 81–94
- The Africa Center (2024). *The State of Democracy in Africa*, available at https://theafricacenter.org/files/galleries/TAC_State_of_Dem_Report_12_02.pdf. Accessed on 9 February, 2026
- The United Nations (2020). UN and SDGs: A Handbook for Youth, The United Nations, available at <https://www.local2030.org/library/302/UN-and-SDGs-A-handbook-for-youth.pdf>. Accessed on 01/02/2026
- Zamfir, I. (2021). State of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa: Democratic progress at risk. European Parliamentary Research Service. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690647/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690647_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690647/EPRS_BRI(2021)690647_EN.pdf)