

## **One People, One Goal:**

### **Senegalese Development and Self-Determination under United Nations Paradigms**

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#### **Abstract**

Developed by a team of international experts, the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intend to set universal paradigms for global development before the year 2030. While these paradigms of development are widely accepted as desired outcomes, special care must be taken in analyzing their ascertainment by Global South countries who did not have a prominent part in defining the goals in the first place. In the case of Senegal, development prospects can be better ascertained by examining the SDGs in tandem with nation-level development plans that better represent the country's past and present development goals. This article aims to analyze Senegalese development in context of the SDGs while also evaluating African expert perspectives on the relevance of the SDGs themselves in Senegalese development paradigms. In doing so, it paints a more comprehensive picture of Senegal's path to progress.

*Keywords:* Senegal, International Development, SDGs, Decolonial Epistemology

## Introduction

One of the few African countries to maintain peaceful transitions of political power since its independence in 1960, Senegal has historically drawn international attention as a promising hub for development and as an exemplar of African sociopolitical progress. However, despite its recognition as one of the most well-anchored African democracies, Senegal continues to struggle with socioeconomic stability. Massive fiscal consequences from structural adjustment programs of the 1970s and 80s continue to ripple out into the population, with significant impacts on women and the rural poor (Randle 2004). And with 35.6% of Senegalese citizens living below the poverty line as of 2017 (Hughes 2020), the nation still requires significant progress in multitudinous sectors if it is to become on track to achieving the United Nations SDGs by 2030. When discussing Senegal's development trajectory, it is critical to avoid common pitfalls such as assuming development systems are universally applicable across the African continent. These general indiscretions and imperial perspectives were what rendered the everyday consequences of structural adjustment programs and other top-down development systems so devastating for ordinary folks across the African continent in the first place.

While the seventeen United Nations SDGs were sourced from experts across the globe, one must consider that it is unlikely for an international foreign body historically dominated by the Global North to pinpoint the best interests or needs of each country in the Global South (Malone & Hagman 2002). In ascertaining Senegal's development prospects, it is therefore crucial to not only assess the nation's progress towards the UN SDGs, but also to discern the respective relevancy of those goals to Senegal according to native African expert perspectives. This paper presents both an evaluation of Senegal's progress towards sustainable development as outlined by the United Nations paradigms, as well as several African perspectives on the

relevancy of these development paradigms themselves. It contributes to the literature by taking a two-pronged approach to development that both evaluates Senegalese development against the SDGs and elevates African expert opinions in an attempt to avoid imperial epistemology. By combining an assessment of development with an identification of the most and least important Sustainable Development Goals for Senegal, this paper paints a more comprehensive picture of the country's practical path to progress.

### **Progress towards United Nations Goals**

Before exploring the relative importance of the 17 SDGs in the context of Senegalese development and national interest, this paper presents a discussion of Senegal's progress towards them. The following evaluation combines data sourced from international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank with perspectives from within Senegal to create a more holistic overview of development as we approach 2030. The United Nations goals are grouped into seven clusters for evaluation: economic growth, health and wellbeing, education, infrastructure, environmental action, institutional strength, and equality. Special attention is paid to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Senegal's trajectory toward each goal cluster.

As some of the most fundamental aspects of socioeconomic progress, poverty alleviation, job creation, and economic growth constitute the first and eighth Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the United Nations. As previously mentioned, over one-third of Senegalese citizens were living below the poverty line in 2017. While this marks a decrease from 46.7% in 2011 (UN 2021), over one-fourth of the population will still be living in poverty by 2030 if that rate of decrease remains stagnant. Amadou Hott, the Senegalese Minister of Economy, Planning, and Cooperation, was interviewed about Senegal's economic prospects by the OPEC Fund months

before the COVID-19 pandemic began. In the interview, Hott stresses the importance of national programs such as the 2014 Plan for an Emerging Senegal (PES) in job creation and economic growth. In the four years after Phase I of the PES began in 2014, average annual GDP growth more than doubled from 3% to 6.6%. Additionally, looking ahead to the 2020-2024 period, Hott states that with a projected growth rate of 8%, he expects the nation to generate over 200,000 new jobs annually (Hughes 2020).

While these calculations from early 2020 seem promising, COVID-19 posed a notable burden on Senegal's economic development. From the beginning of 2019 to the end of 2020, the GDP growth rate plummeted from 5.3% to negative 0.7%, and over 235,000 formal jobs were lost (Mbaye et al. 2021). The pandemic-generated economic downturn certainly renders Hott's projections of growth less achievable within a four-year window. However, with the emergence of national COVID-19 response programs such as the Program for Economic and Social Resilience, Mbaye et al. predict that the downturn will only be a temporary hindrance for Senegal's economic development trajectory.

Along with fiscal growth, another foundational aspect of development is national health. The topic of health encompasses UN goals two and three: zero hunger and good health and well-being. Senegal has demonstrated promising development in the area of hunger alleviation; it cut its proportion of malnourished inhabitants from 24.2% in 2001 to 9.4% in 2018 (UN 2021). The nation made similarly significant strides against mortality and communicable illness in the new millennium; between 2001 and 2018, Senegal cut its infant mortality rate in half, decreased the rate of malaria incidence by over 78%, and decreased the rate of new HIV infections by over 85% (UN 2021).

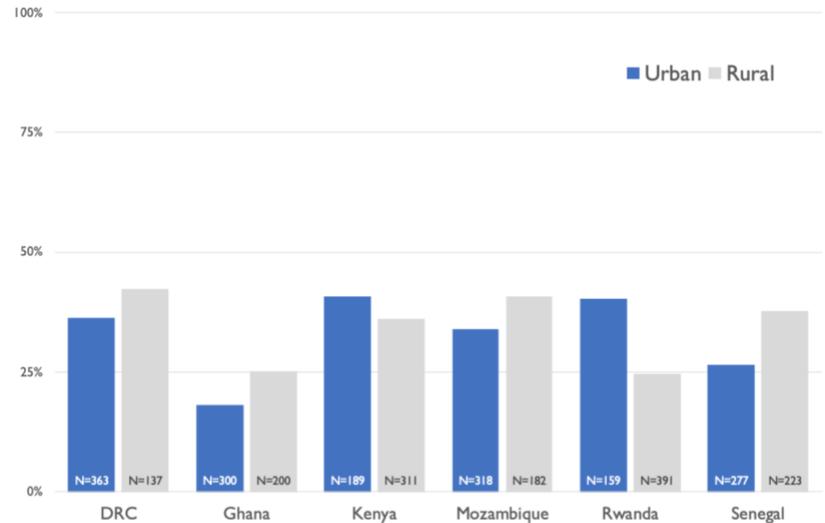
Clearly, the event with the most pressing implications for this goal cluster is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As of August 2021, Senegal has been home to over 64,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with its average fatality rate of around 2% slightly below global averages (Hasan et al. 2021). Despite being among the first African countries to implement the United Nations' COVAX vaccination program, only 5.38% of the population was at least partially vaccinated as of August 2021. Additionally, the country began experiencing its most exponential spike in cases as the delta variant spread in July 2021 (Ritchie 2021). While the government continued to implement mask requirements and offer COVID testing, the spread of new variants has highlighted the lackluster efficacy of Senegal's vaccination program. Without an influx of vaccines and a better-structured national vaccination initiative, the pandemic will continue to derail prospects for improved Senegalese national health.

Another crucial frontier in the path to development is education; without an informed citizenry, Senegalese progress in health, infrastructure, equality, and myriad other sectors would be rendered impossible. The nation has made steady progress towards educational development in the 21st century, but primary education and higher levels of learning still remain inaccessible to considerable portions of the Senegalese public. The national completion rate for the equivalent of middle-school education rested at 50.1% in 2018, up from only 32.8% in 2001. Pre-primary education is even less accessible, with only 15.5% of children attending some form of preschool education before they enroll in primary school. (UN 2021). Despite these shortcomings, Senegal has implemented decisive plans for future development. The Education and Training Quality, Equity, and Transparency Act implemented in 2013 has put the nation on track to develop more accessible curricula and form effective school boards at the regional level (Global Partnership for Education 2020).

Much like other regions of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic presented both consequences and opportunities for national education in Senegal. Beginning in 2020, many Senegalese primary and secondary schools were shut down due to national COVID-19 policies and a lack of access to personal protective equipment and sanitary infrastructure for teachers and students (Ritchie 2021). However, coordination amongst the Senegalese Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and local education NGOs generated funding for the development of national TV and radio education materials that increased access to learning at home (Global Partnership for Education 2020). While the sharp decline in physical schooling certainly inhibited student progress, the creation of distance learning materials presents an opportunity for some Senegalese communities to obtain education that had previously remained inaccessible to them.

When one thinks of development, a common topic that comes to mind is infrastructure; not only does physical infrastructure materially improve the lives of everyday people, but the presence of good infrastructure reinforces citizens' belief in the legitimacy of their government. For the purposes of this evaluation, infrastructure includes technological as well as physical systems accessible to Senegalese citizens. Overall, Senegal continues to struggle in the realm of physical infrastructure and sanitation systems; the proportion of the population with access to basic hand-washing facilities has rested at approximately 20.85% since 2013. In response, Senegalese conferences such as the Dakar World Water Forum 2021 are geared towards finding diplomatic solutions to the water accessibility crisis that is "a major concern" for West Africa, according to co-president Abdoulaye Sene (Défis Humanitaires 2020). Senegal has also made significant strides in electricity systems, with 61.7% of the population able to access electricity in 2017 as opposed to 26% in 1993 (UN 2021).

As with the education development goal, COVID-19 entailed multifaceted results in the realm of sanitation infrastructure. On one hand, the economic downturn spurred by the pandemic decreased access to clean water as citizens reported longer travel times to access water sources (USAID 2021). As demonstrated in Figure 1., this difficulty was more prominent in rural areas. On the other hand, however, COVID-19 seems to have set forth a massive social norms change regarding sanitation that has increased demand for related infrastructure moving forward.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of respondents answering “Yes” to the question, “Has Covid-19 made it more difficult to get your drinking water?” Source: USAID 2021

Often marginalized in African development discourse, actions regarding environmental protection and climate change have also played an integral role in Senegalese development. As a grounds for placing land space under governmental protection and implementing plans for long-term harvesting, climate action has a considerable impact on myriad goals ranging from agricultural production to governmental legitimacy. While Senegal has recently increased the amount of key terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity areas protected from exploitation, deforestation presents a difficult challenge for the government to control. The land area covered by forest has steadily declined since 2000, reaching an annual net change in forest area of negative 0.5% in 2020. In response, the country has made progress in developing plans for its national forests; the proportion of forest area under long-term management skyrocketed from 18.1% in 2000 to 70.4% twenty years later (UN 2021).

While COVID-19 did not present immediate consequences for deforestation or sustainability practices in Senegal, the pandemic may have indirectly stressed the importance of national climate action. First, the pandemic-related economic downturn and supply chain disruption in Senegal uncovered the fragility of the nation's critical agricultural sector. This highlighted the need for increased governmental controls on agricultural production, including the sustainable management of agricultural lands (International Organization for Migration 2020). Additionally, COVID-19 acted as a reminder of the importance of proactive disaster-mitigation policies and the devastating consequences of unmanaged risk - two topics that are similarly pertinent in the national discussion on climate policy (Tall 2020).

As a penultimate goal cluster, institutional strength marks a stepping stone to the achievement of all other Sustainable Development Goals. Not only do strong governmental institutions and partnerships spur progress towards development paradigms, but said progress gives credence to the legitimacy of the government's ability to benefit Senegalese people. On an administrative level, Senegal has increased the universality of national institutions, with 77.4% of children under five having been registered with a civil entity at birth as of 2017. Additionally, Senegal has progressively obtained more politico-economic sovereignty on the international stage, with national debt to foreign entities decreasing from 18.3% of export revenues in 1990 to 9.7% in 2017. However, despite stable and participatory national institutions, Senegal still struggles to deliver justice to its population; 37.8% of its 2018 prison population consisted of unsentenced detainees (UN 2021), demonstrating high rates of extra-judicial arrests.

As with education and infrastructure, Senegal's trajectory towards strong institutions was both progressed and inhibited by the pandemic. On an encouraging note, the pandemic underscored the ability of the national government to quickly respond to national dilemmas and

prevent civilian deaths by mandating mask usage and suggesting school closures (Ritchie 2021). Additionally, it showcased the effectiveness of partnerships between government, local NGOs, and international organizations in creating helpful pandemic responses such as the aforementioned national TV and radio learning materials. However, other partnerships such as the COVAX program initiated by the UN and implemented by the Senegalese government quickly uncovered the national government's inability to both promote prosocial behavior amongst its own population as well as to exert enough global power to demand adequate vaccines from the Global North (Ritchie 2021).

One final development cluster that underlies all 17 development goals is that of equality. Similar to several surrounding nations, Senegal suffers from significant gaps in wealth, opportunity, education, and safety for different genders and different regions. United Nations development goals five and ten specifically aim to eliminate these inequalities. The rural-urban opportunity gap exists in many sectors, but especially in wealth and access to education; most national wealth is concentrated in the capital of Dakar, and primary school enrollment rates for Dakar and urban Ziguinchor are more than double that of the rural region of Kaffrine (Diene 2014). While Senegal has made impressive progress towards equal gender representation in government after the Gender Parity Law increased the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women from 19.2% in 2001 to 43% in 2017 (UN Women 2021), many women still experience dangerous consequences of misogyny every day. Over 12% of Senegalese women and girls ages 15-49 have experienced sexual assault in the past year, 8.4% of girls aged 20-24 years old in 2017 were married before they turned 15, and 24% of women and girls ages 15-49 have experienced female genital mutilation in the past year (UN 2021). The nation continues to have a

long way to go in regard to ending the epidemic of gender-based violence that still plagues the lives of its women and girls.

Much like other developmental goals, the COVID-19 pandemic only worsened gender-based and regional gaps in wealth and wellbeing. Senegalese women make up the majority of the national healthcare force and the majority of homemakers (Ba 2020); not only were women in the formal workforce disproportionately exposed to COVID-19 because of their presence in the healthcare sector, but school closures and lack of childcare access increased the disproportionate burden on women at home. And while Senegal has made progress in the realm of increasing formal women-run businesses, the pandemic will likely erase this promising development. According to Nicole Gakou, President of the Union of Women Entrepreneurs in Senegal, female business owners are less likely to receive crucial loans, and many have been forced to choose between keeping their company or their household afloat (UN Women 2020). Additionally, COVID-19 promises to perpetuate the feminization of poverty in Senegal. Senegalese women constitute the majority of informal workers, a group that often lacks access to veritable health insurance and paid leave. During the pandemic, many such women were forced to choose between an income or protecting their own health. Similar gaps were exacerbated for Senegal's rural populations; the majority of rural work lies in the informal sector, and access to health centers is sparse outside metropolitan areas (Diene 2014).

Overall, while Senegal has made impressive strides towards some goals such as economic growth and hunger eradication, there is still a long path ahead toward achieving goals such as universal infrastructure access and gender parity. The emergence of COVID-19 presented an unexpected barrier to development, but projections characterize it as a temporary

barrier that may have in fact engendered a handful of surprising benefits in the realms of education, infrastructure, and climate action.

### **SDG Relevance to Senegalese National Interests**

When discussing national development in Global South countries, it is common to use a comparison between national statistics and international expectations not only as a marker of current progress but also as an indication for the future. Sectors with the least development according to foreign guidelines are suggested for prioritization, while others disappear from international discourse after being deemed satisfactory. While this approach certainly has merit in that it presents a standardized method of measuring a nation's development against global standards such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, it omits consideration of what the nation itself deems the most important development areas for prioritization. Therefore, in analyzing which development goals are most and least important, it is critical to center the opinions of people from the nation being analyzed. In doing so, one avoids the status-quo Western development notion that countries in the Global South do not know what is best for themselves. After decades of structural adjustment programs that failed to give global legitimacy to African governments, much less African citizens, as well as multiple instances of the United Nations ignoring appeals for African independence, it is time to seriously prioritize the African Union mantra: "African solutions to African problems." Thus, when deciding which goals are most and least important from the perspective of Senegalese development, the answer must be those goals that most closely align with Senegalese-generated development paradigms.

The 2014 Plan for an Emerging Senegal (PES) facilitates the identification of the three most important Sustainable Development Goals for Senegal, seeing as the PES is in fact

organized into three distinct pillars: bringing about structural transformation of the economy, promoting human capital, and enabling good governance (Presidency of Senegal 2021). In order to identify the most important Sustainable Development Goals, one must simply identify which ones are most relevant to the PES pillars.

The match between the first PES pillar and its corresponding Sustainable Development Goal is fairly clear-cut; out of the seventeen goals, “decent jobs and economic growth” best matches the paradigm of structural economic transformation. It is crucial to note that the development paradigm as authored by Senegal transcends the Sustainable Development Goal of economic growth to discuss structural transformation; clearly, the structural adjustment programs from the World Bank and IMF left much to be desired in terms of Senegalese autonomy and socioeconomic wellbeing. Presently, the development goal of economic transformation is crucial because it presents a chance for Senegal to create a sustainably healthy economy that is not as reliant on exports and foreign aid as in the past (Randle 2004). In her essay “Six Questions African Policymakers Must Answer Now” (2016), development scholar Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala highlights this crucial opportunity by asserting that economic diversification is a “vital part of the long-run challenge in Africa” that must be financed in large part by domestically mobilized resources instead of funds from abroad in order to be sustainable.

A 2021 report on economic diversification by researchers at Dakar’s University Cheikh Anta Diop expounds upon the extensive benefits of pivoting away from reliance on manufacturing exports and incorporating tradable, moderately skilled industries in Senegal. These industries are known as industries without smokestacks (IWOSS) and include transportation, arts and entertainment, horticulture, and tourism (Mbaye et al. 2021). In addition to helping restructure the Senegalese economy, IWOSS show promise for closing the gender

gap; Figure 2 highlights how IWOSS have shown incredible employment growth for Senegalese women compared to the overall economy. Overall, the SDG of economic growth is crucial to Senegal because it both aligns with national priorities and provides an opportunity for unprecedented native-led structural adjustment.

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	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Overall economy</b>	<b>0.55</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.76</b>
<b>Total IWOSS</b>	<b>0.77</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<b>0.97</b>

**Figure 2.** Senegalese employment elasticity (ability for economy to provide jobs as it grows) in 2021. Source: Mbaye et al. 2021

match to a specific SDG, seeing as it touches on many sectors of development. However, given the Presidency of Senegal's (2021) description of the pillar involving "a significant improvement of people's living conditions and a more sustained fight against social inequalities," it seems that the SDG of reduced inequalities best matches the Senegalese paradigm. While the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities such as rural-urban healthcare disparities or the gender pay gap is commonly perceived as the end result of a successfully developing state, equality is in fact a crucial catalyst for development. Globally, women currently earn slightly more than half of what men make on average (Ba 2020). This gender pay gap persists even in countries where women have the opportunity to work the exact same jobs as their male counterparts. However, if women were invited to play an identical role to men in labor markets, global annual GDP could increase by 26% over a period of ten years (Woetzel et al. 2015). In Senegal, progress towards gender parity would also likely catalyze sustainable economic diversification, because unemployed

Senegalese women tend to find formal work in IWOSS sectors such as human services and horticulture (Mbaye et al. 2021). Increased economic diversification would in turn lead to more abundant formal job options for those living in rural areas, which would then also decrease the significant Senegalese rural-urban wealth gap. Clearly, equality is a crucial paradigm for Senegal. Instead of following a merely linear trajectory, the path toward parity involves a cyclical process in which sustainably creates new opportunities for the Senegalese people and their socioeconomic stability. When it comes to equality, there is no finish line - only a continuum of self-perpetuating improvements. In other words, the end result of equality is sustainable development.

The third PES pillar, enabling good governance, is less general than its predecessor and thus more easily mappable to one specific Sustainable Development Goal: institutional strength, peace, and justice. In the description for its third development paradigm, the Presidency of Senegal (2021) explains that enabling good governance exists to “strengthen security and stability, protect rights and liberties, consolidate the rule of law and create a setting more conducive to social peace.” While one may read this and wonder why institutional strength should be heavily prioritized given the historical stability of Senegal’s democracy, it is important to remember that Senegal would have fallen into patterns of dictatorship and other forms of undemocratic rule without the intervention of civil society groups (Maguchu 2019). Furthermore, the only reason such civil society groups were allowed to exist and protest as much as they did was because of institutional civil liberties. Strong institutions and civil justice are generationally reinforcing; if civil liberties are taken away at one point in time, the citizenry’s ability to take back its rights from undemocratic governance is dampened significantly. Additionally, good governance in Senegal is essential for economic stability. Since democratization became a

popular aid conditionality in the 1990s (Rijnierse 1993), the maintenance of good governance facilitates the continuation of foreign aid on which Senegal remains partially dependent.

None of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are irrelevant to Senegal, but some goals are certainly more immediate and relevant to both macro-level national interests and everyday citizens than others. Considering this, if forced to identify the least important development goal for Senegal, it would be responsible consumption and production. While this goal is certainly crucial to the longevity of national and global environmental health, several other countries including the United States are much farther from achieving it. For example, the United States' domestic material consumption was 20.3 metric tons per capita in 2017, as compared to Senegal's 3.2 metric tons per capita in the same year (UN 2021). Additionally, Senegal has been demonstrating steady decreases in material footprint and consumption per capita since 2010. Considering the absence of explicit goals regarding consumption and production in the key PES pillars and the nation's relative success at achieving them already, responsible consumption and production can be classified as least relevant to contemporary Senegal.

### **Reimagining SDGs in a Decolonial Context**

While the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals were designed to be comprehensive, the list could benefit from the addition of one more goal geared specifically toward previously colonized countries, including Senegal: regaining sovereignty on the global stage amidst globalization. Even though most African nations gained independence in the 1960s, most have remained trapped in cycles of debt, structural adjustment, and recession that have rendered them vulnerable to predatory imperial policies and the negative consequences of globalization

(Ibrahim 2013). Without national sovereignty, Global South countries miss out on opportunities to create their own practical goals and innovations.

During the beginning of structural adjustment programs in the 1970s, international fiscal organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund saw African debt as the result of irresponsible governance. Consequently, these programs depleted resources from federal governments across the continent, forcing them to privatize formerly state-owned organizations (Logan & Mengisteab 1993). But after the end of the Cold War spurred a newfound idealization of multiparty democracy, democratization became not only an expectation of African governments but a conditionality for aid (Rijnierse 1993). Simply put, the expectations suddenly imposed on Africa from foreign investors were completely disconnected from previous paradigms and incongruent with the state of African government. In the process of being held accountable to unrealistic foreign paradigms, former colonies were unable to pioneer their own unique paths to sustainable development.

And as highlighted by Ibrahim (2013), this pattern continues today: “Some demands from international circles [including those for democracy, gender equality, poverty eradication, etc.] are not in line with contextual realities in Africa.” Managing globalization and international expectations such as the Sustainable Development Goals demands stronger leadership and resource allocations to national governments so that formerly colonized regions such as Senegal may finally act in their own interests, with no strings attached.

## **Conclusion**

In discussing the development trajectory of Global South countries such as Senegal, some quickly slip into an imperial epistemology that views any development as the product of foreign

influence and regression as the product of native incompetence. Under this method of thought, countries are often measured against international standards that are entirely incongruent with their domestic socioeconomic realities. In order to avoid this method of thought, one must take care to couple comparisons between national performance and international paradigms with native evaluations on the relevance of the paradigms themselves. It is highly likely that Global South countries have a clearer picture of their practical development trajectory than international circles that remain dominated by the Global North.

This paper attempted to apply this two-pronged approach to the topic of development in Senegal, pairing an evaluation of the nation's progress towards the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals with a discussion of the goals' relevance to preexisting Senegalese development projects and national interests. After evaluating Senegalese progress in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is clear that while Senegal has made considerable improvement in economic growth, poverty reduction, and hunger eradication, the country fails to progress towards gender parity and sustainable sanitation infrastructure. When pairing the results of this evaluation with the pillars of the native-directed Plan for an Emerging Senegal, one sees that the three Sustainable Development Goals most integral for contemporary Senegalese development are economic growth, reduced inequalities, and institutional strength. Keeping the same considerations in mind, the goal that emerged as least relevant to modern Senegal was responsible production and consumption.

However, among the multitude of UN Sustainable Development Goals, one measure of development was left to be desired for former colonies: gaining enough sovereignty to act purely out of national interest. While this at first may not seem conducive to global progress, it is important to remember that all Global North countries have had the option of acting entirely out

of national interest for decades, and have historically even disguised self-serving foreign policy as benevolent actions for global improvement. Meanwhile, most Global South countries are too dependent on foreign aid to ever have the option of acting completely out of national interest, an option that may well lead to more sustainable improvement than if the countries were to work only towards foreign-imposed standards. Ultimately, while the 17 SDGs provide important standards for global development, Senegal must strive to reach a point at which it has the same power as other countries to act as specified by its own national motto. With “one nation, one goal” at heart, truly sustainable development is sure to follow.

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