

ARDN POSITION PAPER

Five Years to 2030: What the SDG Deadline Really Means for Rural Africa

AFRICAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

A collaborative platform convened by the

Rural Nurture Initiative



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This position paper reflects the authors' collective perspective based on years of on-the-ground experience working with rural communities across Africa. We welcome dialogue, partnership, and collaboration with all stakeholders committed to rural development in Africa.

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Executive Summary

Five years. That is all the time we have left before 2030 arrives and the world takes stock of whether we kept the promise made in 2015; a promise to leave no one behind, to build a world of equity, sustainability, and human dignity for all. For the approximately 600 million people living in rural Africa, these five years represent not just a countdown, but a moment of reckoning.

According to the 2024 SDG Report, only 17% of targets globally are on track to be met by 2030. In rural Africa, 46% of the population lives in extreme poverty compared to 7% in urban areas, about 600 million lack electricity, and rural women produce 80% of Africa's food yet own less than 20% of the land.

The world cannot achieve sustainable development without transforming rural areas. We need a fundamentally different approach: A Rural-first Approach. This requires redirecting financing to where poverty is concentrated, investing in rural agriculture and women farmers' land rights, decentralizing decision making, prioritizing basic infrastructure, and measuring rural progress separately.

Five years is enough time to make meaningful progress if we act with urgency, courage, and commitment. Our response will determine the fate of hundreds of millions of people and the future of an entire continent.

"The world cannot achieve sustainable development without transforming rural areas."





Introduction

According to the 2024 Sustainable Development Goals Report, only 17% of SDG targets globally are on track, while nearly half have shown minimal or moderate progress and over a third have either stalled or regressed (1). But this aggregate statistic masks a more disturbing reality: the urban-rural divide means that rural communities are falling even further behind. Consider these facts:

- ▶ **SDG 1 (No Poverty):** About 79% of the world's poor live in rural areas, with poverty rates in rural areas reaching 17.2%, more than three times higher than urban areas at 5.3% (2). In Africa specifically, where about 50-60% of the population lives in rural areas, 46% lives in extreme poverty compared to just 7% in urban areas (3).
- ▶ **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger):** Rural Africa produces the majority of the continent's food, yet food prices in sub-Saharan Africa have steadily increased between 2020 and 2022 due to climate change, conflicts, and supply chain disruptions (4). The 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report emphasizes the urgent need to accelerate progress on ending hunger and eliminating food insecurity (5).
- ▶ **SDG 3 (Good Health):** Sub-Saharan Africa has an average density of only 1.55 physicians, nurses, and midwives per 1,000 population, far below the WHO SDG threshold of 4.45 health workers per 1,000 population needed to achieve universal health coverage (6). Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for approximately 70% of global maternal deaths, with rural women facing even higher mortality risks (7).
- ▶ **SDG 4 (Quality Education):** In sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than two-thirds of children complete primary school, compared to nearly 90% or higher in most other regions (8). Children from rural households are almost three times less likely than urban children to complete their education (9).
- ▶ **SDG 6 (Clean Water):** As of 2023, 2.2 billion people lacked safe drinking water, and rural areas face a 16-percentage-point gap in early childhood education attendance compared to urban areas, due to clean water access challenges, with water collection duties often falling on women and girls (10).
- ▶ **SDG 7 (Affordable Energy):** Approximately 600 million Africans lack access to electricity, with 85% of those without access living in rural areas (11). By 2023, 451 million people in rural sub-Saharan Africa remained without electricity (12).

These are not just statistics. They are lives, dreams, and potentials unrealized. They are children who will never reach their full capabilities, mothers who will die in childbirth, farmers who cannot access markets, and communities that remain trapped in cycles of poverty, all while the clock ticks toward 2030.



The Great Disconnect: Global Goals, Local Realities

We are struck by a profound disconnect in the global development discourse. Leaders speak of digital transformation, climate finance, and innovative partnerships. These are important, yes. But when you have worked in rural communities, you understand that the most pressing needs are far more fundamental.



A farmer in rural Uganda or rural Ghana, does not need a sophisticated climate adaptation framework; she needs a road to transport her crops to market before they rot. A mother in rural Nigeria does not need a policy paper on universal health coverage; she needs a midwife within reach when she goes into labor. A student in rural Malawi does not need a digital literacy program; he needs a school with a roof, desks, and teachers who show up.

This is the great disconnect: the SDG architecture was designed in conference rooms far removed from the realities it seeks to address. The goals themselves are universal and aspirational, and rightly so. But the implementation mechanisms have been captured by urbanized thinking, technocratic solutions, and top-down approaches that simply do not work in rural contexts.

Consider how development funding flows. International aid organizations set up offices in capital cities. NGOs establish project headquarters in regional centers. Government ministries concentrate their staff in urban areas. The result? Money, expertise, and attention pool where they are least needed, while rural communities, where the majority of Africa's poorest people still live, are starved of resources.

The Agriculture Paradox: Feeding Others While Going Hungry

Perhaps nowhere is the disconnect more glaring than in agriculture and food security. Rural Africa is the backbone of the continent's food production, yet rural farming communities experience the highest rates of food insecurity and malnutrition. This paradox reveals the deep structural failures in how we approach rural development.

Agriculture employs over 60% of Africa's workforce, and smallholder farmers, most of whom are women, produce most of the continent's food. Yet these same farmers face formidable challenges: lack of access to improved seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, credit, extension services, storage facilities, and markets. When a smallholder farmer produces a good harvest but has no storage facilities, she watches her crops rot. When she has surplus but no roads to transport goods to market, she cannot earn income. When droughts or floods destroy her crops and she has no crop insurance, her family goes hungry, and experiences unimaginable financial burden.

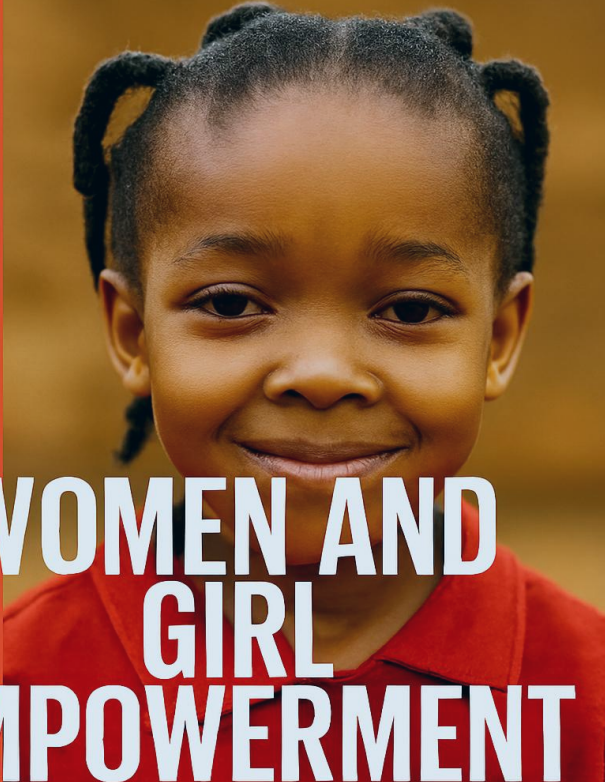
The 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report highlights that Africa must accelerate progress on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), noting that food prices have increased dramatically due to climate change, conflicts, and supply chain disruptions (13). Yet investment in rural agriculture remains chronically inadequate. While African leaders committed to allocating 10% of national budgets to agriculture through the Maputo Declaration, many countries fall far short of this target.

Climate change is hitting rural farmers hardest. Increasingly erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, floods, and new pest infestations are destroying livelihoods. Yet climate adaptation financing rarely reaches smallholder farmers. Instead, it flows to large-scale projects and urban infrastructure. Rural farmers are expected to adapt to climate change without the institutional support necessary to access the tools, knowledge, and resources required.

The agricultural value chain is broken. Farmers receive a tiny fraction of the final price consumers pay for their products. Middlemen, poor infrastructure, lack of processing facilities, and weak market linkages ensure that rural farmers remain poor even when they work hard and produce quality crops. We speak of agricultural transformation and commercialization, but without addressing these fundamental barriers, smallholder farmers will remain trapped in subsistence agriculture, and the poverty cycle will remain unbroken.

2
ZERO
HUNGER





WOMEN AND GIRL EMPOWERMENT

Rural Women and Girls: The Invisible Majority

Any honest conversation about rural Africa must place rural women and girls at the center. They are not a vulnerable group requiring protection, they are the backbone of rural economies, the primary food producers, the water carriers, the caregivers, and the change agents. Yet they remain systematically excluded, exploited, and glossed over in development conversations.

Rural women produce up to 80% of food in Africa, yet they own less than 20% of agricultural land. They work longer hours than men; tending fields, fetching water, collecting firewood, caring for children and the elderly, yet their labor is unpaid and unrecognized. They walk an average of six kilometers daily to fetch water, time that could be spent on education or income-generating activities (15). When girls are responsible for water collection, they miss school. When women must walk hours for firewood, they cannot attend training programs or participate in community decision-making.

The barriers rural women face are not natural, they are constructed and maintained by laws, customs, and institutions. In many African countries, women cannot own land, access credit without a male guarantor, or make household decisions about resource allocation. When a husband dies, his family often seizes the land his wife has worked for decades. When droughts occur, women and girls eat last and least. When schools are far away, girls

“Women and girls are not a vulnerable group requiring protection, they are the backbone of rural economies.”

stay home while boys attend. Smallholder women farmers lack access to agricultural extension services, improved seeds, fertilizers, and modern equipment. Credit systems ignore them. Land tenure systems dispossess them. Market systems exploit them. Development programs design projects around male farmers while treating women as beneficiaries rather than producers. The result? Rural women farm smaller plots with inferior tools and inputs, yet are expected to feed their families and contribute to household income.

The health burden on rural women is staggering. With only 1.55 health workers per 1,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa and most health facilities located in urban areas, rural women give birth without skilled attendance, suffer from preventable diseases, and die from treatable conditions. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 70% of global maternal deaths, with rural women facing exponentially higher risks than their urban counterparts (16). A woman in rural sub-Saharan Africa has a 1 in 37 lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes.

“Achieving the SDGs in rural Africa is impossible without transforming the lives of rural women and girls.”

Rural girls face compounded disadvantages. They are less likely than boys to attend school, more likely to drop out, and face barriers at every level of education. Child marriage remains prevalent in rural areas, ending girls' education and trapping them in cycles of poverty and early childbearing. When rural girls do attend school, they often lack separate sanitation facilities, female teachers as role models, and safe transportation, all of which contribute to high dropout rates.

At the same time, statistics often fail to capture rural women's resilience, innovation, and determination. Despite persistent barriers, rural women organize savings groups, form cooperatives, adopt improved farming techniques, invest in their children's education, and drive community development. When rural women gain access to resources and opportunities, transformation follows. Evidence consistently shows that investing in rural women yields higher returns than most development interventions. Women reinvest approximately 90% of their income in their families and communities, compared to about 35% for men.

Achieving the SDGs in rural Africa is impossible without transforming the lives of rural women and girls. This requires legal reforms to secure land rights, financial inclusion initiatives to provide credit and savings services, agricultural extension programs designed for women farmers, investments in water and energy infrastructure to reduce unpaid labor burdens, quality education for girls, accessible healthcare, including maternal health services, and genuine participation of rural women in decision-making at all levels.

Rural women are not waiting for permission or programs. They are already organizing, innovating, and leading. Our responsibility is to remove the barriers holding them back and provide the support they need to fully realize their potential. Until rural women and girls can claim their rights, access resources, and participate in rural economies and societies, the SDGs will remain unfulfilled promises.

The Cost of Failure: What Happens When We Miss 2030

Let us be clear about what is at stake. When 2030 arrives and we collectively fail to meet the SDG targets for rural Africa, the consequences will not be merely statistical disappointments. They will be human catastrophes that reverberate for generations.

► Economic Consequences

Africa's demographic dividend (its young, growing population) will become a demographic disaster. Without education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, rural youth will either migrate en masse to already overcrowded cities or become vulnerable to radicalization and conflict. The African Continental Free Trade Area, launched with such promise, will remain an urban phenomenon, unable to tap into the agricultural and productive potential of rural areas.

► Food Security Crisis

Failing rural agriculture means failing continental food security. Africa already imports \$35 billion worth of food annually, a figure that was projected to reach \$110 billion by 2025. If we do not invest in rural farmers, strengthen agricultural systems, and build rural infrastructure, Africa will become even more dependent on food imports, vulnerable to global price shocks, and unable to feed its growing population.

► Social Consequences

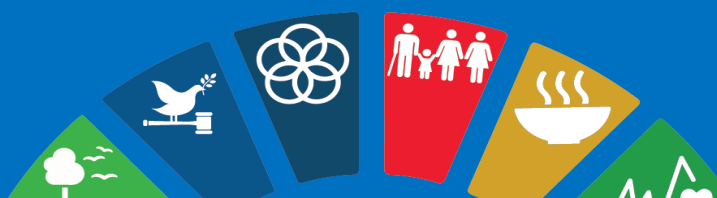
The rural-urban divide will harden into a permanent underclass. Social cohesion will fracture as rural communities feel increasingly abandoned by their governments and the international community. Women and girls, who already bear the heaviest burden in rural areas, will see their rights and opportunities further eroded.

► Environmental Consequences

Rural communities on the frontlines of climate change; droughts in the Sahel, floods in East Africa, desertification across the continent, will be left without adaptive capacity. Deforestation will accelerate as desperate communities seek survival. Biodiversity loss will continue unchecked. The very ecosystems that sustain life will collapse.

► Political Consequences

Failing rural Africa will undermine democratic governance across the continent. Rural populations, seeing no benefits from independence or development, will lose faith in institutions. The legitimacy of the entire post-2015 development agenda will be called into question, making future global cooperation even harder to achieve.



Why Current Trajectories Guarantee We Miss 2030

Let us do the math. At current rates of progress, sub-Saharan Africa will not achieve universal primary education completion until well past 2050. Universal electricity access? Not until 2080 or later if current trends continue. Ending extreme poverty? Perhaps by 2100, if we are optimistic. These are not pessimistic projections; they are based on actual progress rates over the past decade (17).

Consider what it would take to achieve just one SDG target (universal electricity access) by 2030. We would need to connect approximately 90 million people per year for the next five years. Yet in 2023, we connected fewer than 30 million. To triple the current pace while also ensuring quality, reliability, and affordability requires not incremental improvements but transformational change in financing, policy, and implementation.

The healthcare gap is even more overwhelming. To meet the WHO threshold of 4.45 health workers per 1,000 people, sub-Saharan Africa needs to nearly triple its current workforce of 1.55 per 1,000. This means training, deploying, and retaining millions of doctors, nurses, and midwives, most of whom must be willing to work in rural areas where conditions are hardest and pay is lowest. At current training, placement, and retention rates, this target is mathematically impossible by 2030.

Infrastructure provides another compelling example. Building the roads, schools, health clinics, water systems, and irrigation networks rural Africa needs requires not years but decades under current investment levels. A single rural road project can take 5-7 years from planning to completion. Electrifying a rural district requires 3-5 years. Building and staffing a functional rural health center takes 2-4 years. We do not have decades. We have five years!

The financing gap makes the challenge even more critical. The 2024 Africa Sustainable Development Report estimates that Africa needs \$1.3 trillion annually to achieve the SDGs, yet current investment levels fall dramatically short (18). For rural areas specifically, the gap is even wider because rural investments generate lower short-term financial returns, making them less attractive to private investors and even to governments seeking visible wins.

The uncomfortable truth is that 2030 is not a realistic deadline for rural Africa under current approaches. Acknowledging this reality is not defeatism, it is the first step toward honest reckoning with what needs to change. We can either continue pretending that incremental adjustments will work, or we can admit that the SDG framework, as currently implemented, has failed rural Africa and demand fundamental transformation.

"2030 is not a realistic deadline for rural Africa under current approaches."



What Must Change?

A Rural-First Approach

If we are serious about salvaging anything meaningful from the SDG agenda before 2030, we need a fundamentally different approach. While additional summits, reports, and commitments can be useful, they are not what we need most. What we need is action, and that action must be driven by a simple principle: rural first!

Rural-First Approach

► Redirect Financing to Rural Areas

African governments must commit to allocating development budgets proportional to where their populations actually live and where poverty is concentrated. International donors must tie funding to measurable rural outcomes, not urban project visibility. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), providing universal electricity access to all Africans requires \$22 billion annually through 2030, yet investments in electricity access in sub-Saharan Africa stand at only around 15% of this total (14).

► Invest in Rural Agriculture and Food Systems

Agriculture remains the backbone of rural livelihoods, yet we chronically underinvest in it. We need agricultural extension services, rural credit systems, market infrastructure, irrigation facilities, storage systems, and value chain development. We need climate-smart agriculture techniques, crop insurance schemes, and farmer cooperatives. We need to support rural non-farm economies as well; manufacturing, services, and entrepreneurship that can absorb labor and create prosperity beyond agriculture alone.

► Decentralize Decision-Making

Rural communities know what they need better than consultants in capital cities. We must shift from top-down project implementation to community-led, community-owned development. This means genuine decentralization of power, resources, and decision-making authority to local governments and community organizations.

► Invest in Basic Infrastructure

Before we talk about smart cities and digital transformation, let us build roads, bridges, electricity grids, water systems, schools, and health clinics in rural areas. Unspectacular? Yes. Essential? Absolutely. The returns on rural infrastructure investment are enormous, but they require patient capital and long-term vision.

► Prioritize Women and Girls

Rural women are not beneficiaries; they are agents of transformation. Every dollar invested in rural women's education, health, and economic empowerment yields exponential returns. We need to dismantle the legal, cultural, and economic barriers that hold them back. Women farmers need land rights, access to credit, and control over productive resources.

► Measure What Matters

Our current SDG monitoring systems mask rural realities behind national averages. We need disaggregated data that shows rural-urban disparities. We need to track not just national progress but rural progress specifically. And we need accountability mechanisms that hold governments and donors responsible for rural outcomes.



Call to Action

African governments	<i>Your legitimacy depends on delivering for all your citizens, not just urban elites. Make rural development your priority, not your afterthought. Fulfill the Maputo Declaration commitment to invest 10% of national budgets in agriculture. Build rural roads, electrify rural areas, and ensure rural schools and health centers are staffed and equipped.</i>
International donors and development organizations	<i>Your beautiful offices in Nairobi, Accra, and Dakar are not where development happens, they take place on the field. Fund organizations working in rural areas. Make rural impact your key performance indicator. Scale up financing for rural infrastructure, agriculture, and services.</i>
The United Nations	<i>Your summits and reports have value, but they are not enough. Use your convening power to demand accountability. Use your influence to redirect resources. Champion rural Africa with the same urgency you bring to climate change and pandemic preparedness.</i>
African civil society and grassroots organizations	<i>You are the bridge between global commitments and local realities. Document failures, celebrate successes, and demand better. Build coalitions, raise your voices, and hold power accountable.</i>
Rural communities	<i>You have waited long enough. Organize. Demand your rights. Participate in decision-making. Hold your leaders accountable. Development will not be delivered to you; you must claim it.</i>

Conclusion

Beyond 2030

The SDGs were never meant to be perfect. They were meant to be a compass, pointing us toward a more just and sustainable world. As we approach 2030, it is becoming painfully clear that we are off course, particularly when it comes to rural Africa.

But this is not a counsel of despair. Five years is enough time to make meaningful progress if we act with urgency, courage, and commitment. We can still improve millions of lives. We can still lay foundations for longer-term transformation. We can still demonstrate that global solidarity and development cooperation can work.

However, we must be honest: even if we do everything right starting today, 2030 will arrive with much left undone in rural Africa. The question then becomes, what comes after? Will we learn from our failures and design a post-2030 agenda that genuinely centers rural communities? Will we have the courage to admit that our current approaches have not worked and embrace fundamental reform?

When we think about the farmers, health workers, teachers, mothers, and children in the rural communities where we work, the urgency becomes personal and painful. They do not have the luxury of waiting for another global framework, another decade of promises. They need action now. They need us to stop talking and start delivering.

Five years to 2030. The clock is ticking. Will we keep the promise, or will we explain why we did not?

For rural Africa, the answer to that question will determine not just a set of global indicators, but the fate of hundreds of millions of people and the future of an entire continent.

“The SDGs were never meant to be perfect. They were meant to be a compass”

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Contributing Organizations

African Rural Development Network (ARDN) is a continent-wide community of practice committed to advancing rural development in Africa through knowledge sharing, cross-border learning, policy advocacy, and the implementation of sustainable development solutions. As a collaborative platform, ARDN brings together practitioners, researchers, policymakers, community leaders, and changemakers dedicated to rural transformation, amplifying their collective impact across the continent.

Rural Nurture Initiative (RNI) is a social impact organization dedicated to advancing sustainable development in rural African communities. RNI works directly with communities to address challenges across agriculture, health, water sustainability, gender, youth and economic empowerment, believing that rural transformation is essential to Africa's overall development. RNI convenes the African Rural Development Network (ARDN).

Socodevi is a Canada-based organization that supports and consolidates sustainable and inclusive cooperatives and mutual enterprises as drivers of socio-economic development. Through its TogetHER project in Ghana, Socodevi is empowering rural women, strengthening rural livelihoods, protecting environments against the effects of climate change, and helping rural people achieve financial inclusion. Socodevi works in over 40 countries across the globe.

Agricultural and Rural Management Training Institute (ARMTI) is a Nigerian government-owned institution focused on capacity building in agricultural and rural development. It was established in 1980 and operates under the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. ARMTI's mandate is to provide training, research, and consultancy services in agricultural management, rural development, and agribusiness.



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