

# Sprawl and Congestion in Accra - Challenges and Opportunities of Sustainable Development in Ghana's Capital City



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## **Introduction**

Ghana is one of the fastest urbanising countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The urbanisation level increased by 7 percent points per a period, from 43.8 percent to 50.9 percent in the 2007 onwards (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Desiring to improve its infrastructural status for socio-economic growth and development, Ghana embarked on constructing several commercial, administrative and regional

capitals throughout the country. However, Accra - the capital city of Ghana - remains and continues to be the most attractive venue to many Ghanaians, due to its purported employment opportunities; thereby creating challenges and opportunities for sustainable development. As a sequel to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in 2015, in New York, the international community held a Summit to adopt the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); to reduce marine pollution of all kinds, particularly from land-based activities as well as landfill. The cardinal objective of the SDGs is to be implemented incrementally and persuasively so as to eliminate inequality in living standards, improve infrastructure, access to water and sanitation, empowerment of women and quality education, provision of modern energy, elimination of hunger, poverty and a healthy life (Sustainable Development Goals, 2015). Similarly, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, appointed Nana Akuffo-Addo, President of Ghana, as an advocate from 2017-2018, to work with all stakeholders to promote the SDGs as transformative global agenda (UN Secretary-General, 2017). Against this backdrop, the article examines the challenges and opportunities of sustainable development, in the city of Accra, with a view to determine whether the appointment of Ghana's president as SDGs advocate has contributed to improve the sanitation of the city.

### **Challenges of Sustainability in Accra**

Sprawl is a complex challenge of sustainability which confronts the city of Accra due to its poor infrastructural developments, including transportation planning. Unplanned physical development is a major issue, with encroachment on public spaces such as roads and limited walkways creating congestion and limited mobility. As a Central Business District (CBD) of Ghana, Accra constitutes the busiest venue for economic and political activities with major government and company offices (Agyemang, 2017); and the biggest centre for a large number of formal and informal trade. The informal sector of the economy supports 70 percent to 80 percent of Ghana's labour force, indicating that a larger section of the population throngs the CBD daily to participate in economic activities. The interplay of sprawling city together with economic activities in the CBD have induced severe congestion and exploded environmental degradation in the city (Agyemang, 2017).

Proliferation of slum areas in Accra is another challenge of sustainable development. In line with SDG 11- *sustainable cities and communities*-

governments and stakeholders are required to implement strategic policies to promote a healthy city for national development; however, to the contrary, the Accra Metropolitan Authority (AMA), under the leadership of the president, has failed to initiate policies to ease sprawl, congestion and slums, in the city. The AMA is the authority responsible for the administration of the city in all respects. According to Brookins (2019), Accra grows at 3.3 percent and reached a population of four million inhabitants recently; thereby creating perennial sustainable challenges, namely: slums, squatter settlements, poor sanitation and poor infrastructural developments. The problem of slums in Accra has even received attention in the editorial of the *Daily Graphic* of Ghana, which explained that: “The Graphic finds it disturbing that one of the main sewage systems at the Accra Rehabilitation Centre at the heart of the city has burst, spilling human excreta on the compound. Aside from the health implications, the situation is at variance with president Nana Addo’s vision to make Accra the cleanest city in Africa. The consequent or debilitating effect of this worrying development on the state and people will be dire if immediate action is not taken to fix the broken sewage”. Instructively, the words “worrying” and “broken” adopted by the *Graphic’s* editorial, symbolised a failed leadership to manage the city sustainably.

### **Opportunities of Sustainability in Accra**

The SDGs are replete with opportunities much as challenges. One prominent opportunity is the construction of city-spaces. For example, *SDG 9-Industry, innovation and infrastructure-* requires that governments and city authorities adopt creative technological resources and investments to resolve congestion-related problems within city-centres; in order to promote national economic developments. In that respect, Accra offers the platform for investors to provide services in recyclable, resilient, affordable and low resource-intensity materials, to stem the city’s sprawl challenges. The opportunities also extend to the sectors below:

- City design and planning
- Congestion and sprawl management
- Pollution and flood management
- Transportation and telecommunication
- Solid waste management

With the above designated opportunities, the AMA should provide creative

leaderships to strategize the city as an economic cog, and advance the country's sustainable efforts.

Recycling provides opportunities for which investors can take advantage to develop new cost-effective solutions to resolve plastic waste management across cities in Ghana. For example, in major parts of Accra, plastic packaging escapes collection systems with rubbish/refuse being dumped indiscriminately; whilst construction-related debris clogged drainage and sewage systems endanger the people's health. According to the World Bank (2019), private investors had invested in developmental projects across several countries in Africa with the Bank as a financier. It has stated that: "SSA received US\$6.2 billion across 23 projects, marking a 19 percent decrease in investment levels from 2018. However, the 2019 value is 28 percent higher than the five average at US\$4.9 billion. Ghana and Nigeria were the two major investment destinations in the region with US\$1.5 billion and US\$1.1 billion respectively". Under the World Bank sponsored projects, opportunities exist for private investors to provide services to improve the city's sanitation and congestion challenges through recyclable projects.

### **The Importance of SDGs for Society and Regional Studies**

The SDGs play significant roles in the existence of human society, including regional studies. They enable countries to grow in ways that adapt to the challenges posed by climate change in order to promote quality of human life, diversity of life on earth, including ecosystems. This requires that governments work with stakeholders in devising future targets and strategies which encompass technological resources and transformative policies that advance the needs of the present generation without compromising the future wellbeing of society.

With respect to regional studies, SDGs provide opportunities for academics to engage in collaborative research projects with a view to share/diffuse specialist knowledge to solving a specific challenge/problem. SDG 17 encourages global partnership for solutions toward developments. In that respect, the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between Ghana and Denmark, in respect of the Ghana Ports and Harbour Authority (GPHA) (Tema) is significant. In 2015, the GPHA forged a partnership agreement with the Danish Government, under the Danida Fellowship Scholarship and Research Cooperation; so as to formulate a capacity framework to support the harbour and the city's sustainable challenges.

Furthermore, SDGs also offer opportunities for academics to engage with stakeholders, policy-makers and corporations, to embark on joint- research activities, in order to resolve a problem or improve human wellbeing at the regional or national level, respectively.

## **Conclusion**

This article argues that the challenges and opportunities of sustainability in Accra are diverse and profound. However, the strategic appointment of Nana Addo by Guterres as SDGs' advocate did very little to stem the sprawl and sanitation threats in the city. Although the SDGs are by nature voluntary, the principles are global in scope and provide a necessary framework for national and international efforts to ensure sustainable developments of cities and nations, with a focus to safeguarding the health and wellbeing of humanity and the environment harmoniously. This is a responsibility the city authorities of Accra are expected to uphold.

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