

Online Article

Development, Development Cooperation and Africa in the Twenty-First Century

Introduction

Despite many attempts and initiatives over the last six decades or so, the African continent continues to lag behind many regions of the world in the metrics that gauge humanity's progress. According to data from the World Bank,¹ Africa is the only region where the absolute number of the poor has risen since 1990. Today, some 400 million Africans live in poverty, up from 300 million in 1990.² Even more troubling is that the lion's share of the world's poor, some 60 per cent of the world's population, currently resides in Africa. In 1990, Africa's contribution to world poverty was only 13 per cent.³ Further, even the much-vaunted African middle class would be categorised as poor were they to reside in a developed country. Using a higher poverty line of USD 6.15, which is the median poverty line in high-income countries, close to 90 per cent of Africa's population, virtually everyone, is poor. In sum, global poverty today is largely an African affair.

This has not always been the case. In the immediate post-independence period, lasting roughly from 1960 to 1980, many African countries registered respectable achievements in reducing poverty

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and more generally setting their countries on the path towards self-sustaining growth and development. In a series of studies, the distinguished Malawian economist, Thandika Mkandawire, showed empirically how many African countries, and the continent as a whole, registered rates of economic growth that rivalled peer countries and regions in the world during this period (for example, Mkandawire 2001). These growth rates, in turn, financed palpable improvements in the material lives of the continent's people. For example, much of the continent's health and education infrastructure, which continues to provide services today, was established during this period. Unsurprisingly, this early respectable performance was largely buttressed by industrialisation anchored on a developmental state.

Unfortunately, the arrival of the 1980s brought an end to this period of promise and opportunity. Many countries' industrial bases

began to decline, followed by widespread economic contraction, which lasted close to three decades (and, by some accounts, continues today). The contraction was so deep and long-lasting that real incomes in some countries have yet to return to the levels of the mid-1970s (Rodrik 2016). This is a really vivid portrayal of what some African scholars have referred to as 'Africa's lost decades' (see the writings of Mkandawire; Anyang Nyong'o 1992).

This absence of growth and development in Africa has naturally spawned a veritable industry of research seeking to understand the causes of the continent's underperformance. The output of this work can be grouped roughly into two categories: scholarship that emphasises the role of factors internal to Africa as the cause, and scholarship that stresses the role of external factors. The analyses of the first camp, the 'internalists', have led to the conclusion that Africa's dismal record of economic growth and development stems from the continent's inability to implement 'good' policies (defined as those adopted by the now developed and industrialised countries, particularly those in the West). In other words, Africa's problem is that it has failed to 'copy and paste' from the developed world.

The work of the internalists, further, has sought to understand the fundamental reasons for this failure. And here their analyses have produced what one can only describe as a spaghetti bowl of reasons. Some have argued that it is a result of the ethnic ‘fractionalisation’ that one sees across many countries. Others have blamed corruption as the culprit that has trapped the continent in a bad policy equilibrium. Still others have alluded to the many civil and cross-border wars that break out in many parts of the African continent. Others have explained the situation by laying the blame on Africa’s geography—that is to say, the continent’s topology and ecological conditions have somehow impeded African elites’ ability to implement correct policies. An example of this literature is Jeffrey Herbst’s *States and Power in Africa* (2000), which elicited a most fitting rebuttal from the Kenyan political scientist, Michael Chege (2004).

As can be expected, the internalist literature engendered a reaction from scholars whose analysis had led them to conclude that the principal reasons for the continent’s lacklustre performance lay outside it. These ‘externalists’ see, for example, the slave trade and the imperialism that it gave rise to as quintessential examples of extraneous factors, the legacy of which continues to influence the continent’s economic performance today. Additionally, this second set of scholars considers that contemporary phenomena external to Africa negatively impact the continent’s prospects for economic development. For example, dynamics in the international commodities markets, and the actions of the Federal Reserve Bank in the United States and the international financial institutions such

as the IMF and the World Bank, are viewed as fundamental to Africa’s poor economic performance. Thandika Mkandawire and Charles Soludo, scholars who can be said to be working in the externalist tradition, identified the oil price shocks of the 1970s and the IMF and World Bank’s economic prescriptions of the 1980s and 1990s as key to understanding Africa’s aforementioned ‘lost decades’ (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999).

What is fascinating from the standpoint of the politics of knowledge production is that the two intellectual camps fit neatly, with some exceptions, within a North–South dichotomy. Each camp has been dominated by scholars concentrated in either the global North or the global South. The scholars active in advancing an internalist perspective have been based largely at universities and research institutions in the global North. On the other hand, scholars who have emphasised an externalist analysis of Africa’s problems are based either in Africa or the global South more broadly, or are originally from there. As many (again, Southern) scholars have pointed out, this intellectual division of labour is not coincidental but may be seen as intimately linked with the Cold War geopolitics that has dominated the world ever since the conclusion of the Second World War (for example, Olukoshi 2006). However, careful readers of this large body of work on the African malaise have concluded that the externalist perspective, at both conceptual and empirical levels, more closely reflects the African experience over the last six decades or so (see, for example, Mkandawire 2015). In other words, external factors predominate, but are not alone, in explaining the continent’s laggard performance.

What is Development?

Even though the internalist and externalist perspectives disagree on the causes of underdevelopment in Africa, they both agree that the continent has struggled with development. However, and crucially, the two perspectives have different interpretations of what constitutes the term ‘development’.

For the internalist camp, development is seen simply as an improvement in the incomes of a country’s population. In this sense, development is driven largely by economic growth that is sustained over long periods of time. Therefore, for the internalists, a rough-and-ready assessment of whether a country is developing can be done by observing trends in poverty over time. Reductions in poverty are seen as synonymous with development whereas increases in poverty, as are evident in Africa, signal a reversal of development.

For the externalists, the meaning of development is nuanced. To be sure, the externalists see rising incomes as important for the process of development. That is to say, they see higher per capita incomes, and therefore declining poverty levels, as one criterion for assessing whether development is taking place or not. However, even more important are the sources of economic growth, in addition to assessing whether the development taking place is emancipatory or further entrenches dependency.

On the sources of growth, the externalists emphasise the role of structural transformation in industry as important, which itself can drive rising incomes in a sustainable manner. Importantly, structural transformation is seen as a vehicle for self-reliant development, which gives full meaning to the

calls for self-determination that accompanied the struggle for political independence in Africa. Simply stated, for the externalists, a country may ‘develop’ and yet still find itself even more dependent on others to an extent that undermines its self-determination.

These two differing meanings of development, and their implications for policy, are worth keeping in mind as we deliberate on the prospects for development in Africa in the twenty-first century.

Opportunities and Constraints of Development in Africa in the Twenty-First Century

As the above makes clear, one of the most important policy questions of the twenty-first century is how the African continent is to develop. The gravity of this question cannot be emphasised enough given that the livelihoods of more than a billion Africans will depend on whether and how it is answered. Further, what happens in Africa in the current century will have implications for the rest of the world, given that one out of every three people in the world will be African by the year 2100.⁴ Therefore, resolving the ‘African Question’—that is, the question of Africa’s development—must animate each and every one of us.

In our consideration, we identify the following factors as opportunities and constraints that have a bearing on whether and how Africa will develop in the twenty-first century. These are by no means exhaustive.

The Role of Ideas and Learning from History

As highlighted in the introductory section of this note, idea formation has played an important role

in informing the interpretation of African economic phenomena and, consequently, in informing policy prescriptions. Therefore, in thinking through the potentialities of economic development in Africa in the twenty-first century, we have to pay particular attention to the processes of idea formation and diffusion in and about Africa. If the twentieth century was typified by an unproductive and, quite frankly, destructive cold war logic to idea formation, the twenty-first century will have to do things differently if the continent is to have a chance of success. Those who are genuinely committed to seeing Africa develop will have to adopt an approach to ideation that is anchored on what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) has referred to as epistemic justice—that is, a commitment to understanding Africa on its own terms. And, as many have pointed out, the notion of epistemic justice requires that this time around Africans play a role that is not marginal in the formation of ideas about the continent (Chelwa 2021; Mkan-dawire 2011).

The second aspect of relevance here is that, in thinking about the prospects of Africa’s development today, we should not overlook the achievements that many African countries made in the immediate post-independence era. As alluded to earlier, many countries registered impressive achievements in the social and economic sphere and often under very challenging circumstances. Industrialisation anchored on a developmental state was key in this period of short-lived transformation. Therefore, the relevance and potential of this model for today’s Africa will have to be an important matter of discussion and debate.

The Role of Development Cooperation

As the adage goes, ‘no one is an island’. In this respect, the development of Africa will require the cooperation of partners across the world. And, as so eloquently argued by Adebayo Olukoshi, the turn of phraseology from ‘development aid’ to ‘development cooperation’ is not to be papered over as we think about Africa’s development in the twenty-first century (Olukoshi 2006). Development aid is a child of colonial development—it was born out of strategic calculations in the late colonial period and given life during the early period of the Cold War. For example, US president Harry Truman’s Point Four Program, even though couched in the language of altruism, was conceived of as a bulwark against the spread of Soviet-sponsored communism in the Third World. Unsurprisingly, the patterns of aid came to reflect the realities of whether or not the recipients were considered allies of the United States (and the West in general). Additionally, an element of condescension and racism was built into this model of development aid. Recipients were seen as backward countries needing the tutelage of the more civilised. This language grew and became more evident as colonial developmentalism after World War II gave way to new ways of thinking about the agenda for development studies in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, more recently the language of development cooperation has emerged and replaced that of development aid. The intent in this phraseological turn is to signal that partnerships around development must proceed on a basis of mutual respect, learning and cooperation.

Whether this has been implemented remains a major issue of debate. But in its presentation, it has increasingly been acknowledged that no longer is the monopoly on wisdom the preserve of the West, but it belongs, too, to the rest. In this new articulation, the imparting of knowledge is bi-directional: the more developed partners have much to learn from the developing world, and vice versa.

Finally, development cooperation is beset by an internal epistemological trap: development aid ought naturally to 'commit suicide' if its mission of facilitating development is to be realised. For this mission to bear fruit, it needs to articulate an idea of development that is consistent with the total emancipation of the developing world as opposed to entrenching a regime of subjugation and dependency. What the persisting phraseology suggests, however, is a mission for development aid and cooperation without end in sight, one in which the changing phraseology reflects a desire for paradigm maintenance rather than for rethinking the parameters within which development aid was framed. The agenda to rethink aid, as more recently advanced by the NORAD,⁵ is one that invites us to question the phraseology and make proposals that truly ensure that the potential for development cooperation to deliver on its promise is realistically weighed.

The Role of Geopolitics

In the twentieth century, Cold War geopolitics influenced and constrained Africa's development aspirations. The East-West dichotomy that dominated the latter half of that century, a period which coincided with the political decolonisation of Africa, did not give the continent a fighting chance to chart its own

way. A rejection of the West was simplistically viewed as accepting the East and vice versa. In the same way, there is a risk that geopolitics could stand in the way of the continent's development aspirations in the twenty-first century.

All the available evidence strongly suggests that presently we are undergoing a reconfiguration of power politics at the global level on a scale that has not been witnessed for a while. Many astute analysts of international relations and international power politics forecast the arrival of a multipolar world dominated by a handful of countries. This is a departure from the unipolarity that has prevailed over the last three decades or so. China and Russia appear to have emerged as strong contenders to rival the United States in world influence. In some ways, this move towards multipolarity seems to have been hastened by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, which has betrayed the world's fault lines. That war has been tragic in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. Further, it has led to disruptions in the supply of vital raw materials in many parts of the world, including the African continent, with widescale implications for the welfare of poor people there and elsewhere.

Additionally, enhanced attempts at South-South cooperation also signal the arrival of this new era of geopolitics. For example, the BRICS group of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have recently expanded their membership to include Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The expanded BRICS (BRICS Plus, as it is now known) will have command over 30 per cent of global GDP and just under half the world's population.

Further, the appointment of former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff to head the 'BRICS Bank', officially known as the New Development Bank, highlights the group's ambition to rival traditional international financial institutions in the supply of development finance. And then there are the opportunities for the recapitalisation of the BRICS Bank presented by the addition of new members with sufficient resources, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. All this suggests that BRICS Plus will be a serious rival for the dominance of older blocs, such as the Group of Seven countries (the G7), in setting the global agenda in the remainder of the twenty-first century.

In all this geopolitical reconfiguration that is underway, it is necessary for the African continent to find elbow room to chart its own destiny. Doing so does not mean simplistically picking one geopolitical bloc over the other but rather navigating this new terrain in a way that maximises the continent's benefits. Similarly, the old powers and their blocs (and the new ones for that matter) should allow the African continent the space and latitude to devise strategies of international cooperation that advantage the continent and its people. And if the recent speeches of African and black leaders and government officials in international forums, including those from the CARICOM group, are anything to go by, a new push for a different language of engagement with the international system has already arrived. The demands for a fair, global financial and political system are growing every day, not just from Africa, but from all over the world, including the global North. The effectiveness of the CARICOM Community in mobilising an argument for reparations, restitution and repair, which

finally has found resonance with the adoption of an African Union resolution mandating the government of the Republic of Ghana to lead the reparations and restitutions agenda, all suggest that a different global system is in the offing. It is a matter of when, and not if.

The Role of Climate Change and ‘Green Capitalism’

The threats from climate change will present significant headwinds to the African continent’s aspirations for economic development. The assessments from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and others continue to highlight that the continent will bear the biggest brunt even though its contribution to climate change historically has been negligible. Perennial floods, droughts and historically high temperatures continue to disrupt the livelihoods of millions of Africans who derive a living from agriculture, which relies on favourable weather. Droughts have also affected electric power generation in those African countries that rely on hydropower, with knock-on effects on industry and other parts of the economy. All this goes to show that the best-laid plans for Africa’s growth and development will be laid to waste if adequate strategies to cope with climate change are not addressed. Further, a serious conversation on climate reparations will have to take place given Africa’s limited role in greenhouse gas emissions but maximal burden of the costs of climate change.

A final note to make here is the role that so-called ‘green capitalism’ is likely to have on the African continent’s fortunes. The world is currently in a rush to transition away from fossil fuels towards renewables in a race to mitigate climate change. This ‘green transition’ will

require a retooling of the world’s energy infrastructure in ways that will impact the demand for the types of raw materials that are abundant in Africa. For example, the increased production of electric cars will require millions of additional tons of cobalt and copper, minerals that are widely available on the continent. This increased demand for the types of minerals necessary to aid the green transition has the potential to spark a new scramble for Africa, with possibly dire consequences for the economic, social and political life of the continent. Therefore, the international community and governments across the African continent will have to work together in developing a regulatory infrastructure that protects the continent from the extraction and exploitation that has occurred in the past. Such a framework is already proposed in the Africa Mining Vision⁶ but the broad framework of addressing more recent climate change-related concerns must remain on the agenda.

The Promise of Digital Technology

The African continent has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age estimated at about 19 years.⁷ This population is much more technologically linked with one another and with the outside world than any before it. But, unlike those before it, it also faces bleak prospects for employment opportunities given the continent’s economic challenges. However, the fact that this generation is technologically savvy presents opportunities for the design of the kind of public policies that complement and augment the skills they have already demonstrated. Many are already using technology to solve problems that are unique to their contexts. Many have estab-

lished online entrepreneurial activities that, for example, connect buyers and sellers of services as well as reporting service delivery delays. Some are using technology to facilitate the deepening of democratic tenets in their countries. They are a cohort that is aware of the dilemmas of living a life of poverty and want in a context where development aid is only a fraction of illicit financial flows. Many of their initiatives cannot be scaled up in an effective and sustainable way because of the absence of public support. Technological innovation promises to be one of the main drivers of economic recovery in the twenty-first century and Africa can share in the gains only if we make the necessary investments in its young people.

The Important Role of Policy Autonomy

One of Africa’s big challenges historically has been the inability of its policy elites to determine and implement economic and public policies in an autonomous and independent manner. Whereas in the developed world, questions of economic policy are determined on the basis of how they are likely to influence the country and the welfare of citizens, in the African case, policy considerations have often involved the considerations of external actors such as the IMF, World Bank and the donor community. African policy-makers often have no choice but to make this kind of calculation because of the fear of losing external financial support if they disregard the policy ‘advice’ of external actors. The classic and most egregious case study is the era of policy-making during the structural adjustment years, when virtually all aspects of policy-making were outsourced to the Bretton Woods institutions.

Many ministries of finance across the continent were staffed by foreign policy-makers who occupied crucial and important positions. Some of them were seconded from either from the World Bank or IMF. In Kenya, for instance, ‘dream team’ of technocrats recruited from international organisations was appointed headed by Dr. Richard Leakey. Many other countries like Ghana, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, etc., were forced to accept seconded officials. In Liberia, the USAID sent personnel to take control of the budget office. However, Cote d’Ivoire was the highlight where in April 1994, President Félix Houphouët-Boigny appointed Mr. Alassane Ouattara as the Chairman of the Inter-ministerial Committee for Coordination of the Stabilization Program and Economic recovery. This launched his political career to becoming Prime Minister and later President but it remains unclear if Cote d’Ivoire has enjoyed any sustainable growth or stability. That this experiment risks being repeated in Africa is a sign of how little we learned from the adjustment years. Zambia’s recent experience in trying to resolve its debt problems with the help of the IMF is evidence that external pre-occupations continue to act as constraints on domestic policy-making (Chelwa 2022).

Therefore, granting African governments the autonomy to devise policies as they see fit will be a crucial matter of consideration in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This note set out to assess the prospects of development in Africa in the twenty-first century. In so doing, it recapped the continent’s unfortunate experience with development in the preceding hundred years and the different intellectual

traditions that sought to understand this experience. Further, the note considered the factors that may constrain or aid Africa’s development in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

1. The statistics presented on poverty in Africa are from the World Bank’s Poverty and Inequality Platform, <https://pip.worldbank.org/home>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See population projection here: <https://ourworldindata.org/region-population-2100#:~:text=The%20striking%20change%20between%20now,reach%20just%20under%204%20billion.>
5. See the forthcoming Report titled “Old Problems and New Realities in Africa – and the role of development cooperation” to be launched on 1st November 2023.
6. <https://au.int/en/ti/amv/about>
7. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/africas-median-age-about-19-median-age-its-leaders-about-63#:~:text=The%20Median%20Age%20of%20Its%20Leaders%20Is%20about%2063.,-By%20Ambassador%20Mark&text=Africa%20has%20the%20world’s%20youngest,median%20age%20are%>

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