

Sustainable Development in Africa

A Working Paper

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The key to improving the standard of living in Africa is through sustainable development.

The end of colonization in Africa was seen by many as the beginning in which economic growth, respect for human dignity and sustainable development will take its roots in Africa. The backwardness of Africa was blamed on the colonizers, many believed that with the future and dreams of Africa in the hands of Africans themselves; Africa will merge from the ashes of its colonial past and prosper.

Since independence some thirty years ago many African nations have experimented with several methods of economic development, all of which failed. Many of these economic experiments were designed by experts who have never lived in or been to Africa, their designs were usually in contrast with the circumstances in Africa.

Okolie noted that “most development research/experts did not ask what African themselves really thought and what they really needed to become. They did not ask the various segments of Africa’s local communities how they solved their problems with a view to helping them along similar lines while allowing them to maintain control over the process” (Okolie, 2003, pp. 240)

The Africans were seen as learners when development is concern, while the westerners were seen as teachers. The western nations see themselves marching Africans to development.

As Okolie mentioned “development policies and programs in Africa have been shaped by knowledge and knowledge production that is primarily Euro-American centered, and as a result tends to be exclusionary and often contemptuous of other knowledge and way of knowing, including the lived experienced of the targets of development” (Okolie, 2003, pp. 235).

The theories about development in Africa should not be imported from developed nations and apply directly in Africa; this will never work. Development can only benefit Africa if the people were involved in generating ideas and knowledge about things that will affect their lives.

Okolie argued that “sustainability can only be achieved if researchers enter into dialogue with local communities. This requires, among other things, and institution of higher learning interrogate indigenous knowledge in order to generate policies and programs that are Africa-centered” (Okolie, 2003, pp. 236).

A sustainable development that will address all the relevant issues that Africa is facing and will face in the future should be the model that Africans should utilize when thinking about development. Development should address all the aspects human needs. In Abjibolosoo’s book *The Human Factor in Developing Africa*, Esman (1991, p. 5) noted that “ the process of economic development must be viewed as the means of reducing and/or eliminating poverty, ignorance and diseases; and achieving improvement in the deteriorating human conditions” (Abjibolosoo, 1995, pp. 9).

On the issue of development The United Nations claimed that “the ultimate objective of development must be to bring about a sustained improvement in the well-being of the individual and bestow benefits on all” (Abjibolosoo, 1995, pp. 10). It appears that many Africans are not enjoying the benefits of their countries’ developmental path.

In *Sustainable Development in Africa*, Ukaga views sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Afoaku & Ukaga, p. 1). A sustainable

development that addresses the importance of African environment, educational needs, agricultural needs, economic needs, and the role of African government should be the key starting points when development in Africa is concerned. In essence sustainable development should have its human factor, environmental factors, gender factors and educational factors.

Africa's tried failed developmental paths

Armed with the western experts in development; African leaders were confident that they can lead their nations into development. Many of these so called experts provided African leaders with ill ideas, for instance many valuable resources were directed towards building a manufacturing economy while totally ignoring the importance of Agriculture. As Okolie noted "Agriculture, the mainstay of the economies of Africa and the predominant employer of Africans, received little investment or other helpful attention" (Okolie, 2003, pp. 239)

It looks like the colonial mentality is still affecting African when agriculture is concern. There is not much difference between the colonial government and some of the current African governments. In both of these government, "farmers were pushed to produce crops that Europeans wanted instead of those Africans depended on" (Afoaku & Ukaga, 2005, pp. 191).

In areas where agriculture is encouraged, farmers were encouraged to direct their attention to growing cash crops. The growing of cash crops was seen as the way for African countries can gain hard currency and perhaps attract some foreign investment. The introduction of cash crops has been a total disaster not only to the environment but also to the Africans themselves. For example, "many traditional African crops and

animals, useful to the people and compatible with the local ecology, were displaced by foreign varieties that demanded more from the environment and offered little benefits locally” (Afoaku & Ukaga, 2005, pp.193).

According to James (1999), “African economies have invariably depended on export of renewable and non-renewable resources and cash crops for their foreign exchange earnings. This reliance on commodities and natural resources has made it difficult to sustain developmental efforts”. (James, 1999, pp. 1).

The dependency on cash crops has been a disaster for the majority of Africans especially the farmers. African farmers who usually rely on ancient and basic forms of agriculture are in disadvantage in terms of growing cash crops. Their hard work to produce cash crops usually comes with no benefit. At the end the little they produce cannot provide them with their basic needs. The traditional crops were considered by many African governments and their experts to be less important, therefore “staple crops, cultivated primarily for their use-value, tend to receive little attention” (Okolie, 2003, pp. 248).

The inflation of cash crops in global markets also means that African farmers will see fewer benefits from growing cash crops. The reliance on ancient methods of agriculture by African farmers was seen by many experts as the reason why Africa is not developed. They believe that African farmers should adopt the western form of agriculture like using machines, chemical fertilizers and new crops.

Nature is regarded as something to be mastered and conquered; this theory was experimented by many African countries without considering the fragile aspect of African soil. Countries like Senegal, Mauritania and Mali joined together in order to

exploit their common natural resource which is river Senegal. This river runs from Futa Jallon through Mali, Senegal and Mauritania.

With the advice from their western developers, the river was dammed in order to provide a big western style agro-business to these countries. During the flood seasons farmers in this river valley were able to grow enough local crops, and the pastoral nomads could find enough grass for their cattle's.

The farmers in this river valley were asked to move out so as to make a way for the new modernize form of agriculture adopted from the west. The consequence was devastating to both the pastoral nomads and the local farmers. The pastoral nomads lost a large percentage of their grazing lands and a large number of farmers were left without any land.

The project was carried out without examining its negative consequences on the environment, the people or the wildlife. All the materials used for the building of the dam were from the developed nation and the products of the big agro-business will end up going to the consumers in the developed countries.

The dam created new water-borne diseases uncommon to these areas, disease like river-blindness have begun to affect the people living near the river. Malaria which usually occurs during the rainy season is now a year-around health problem that people around the river bank have to confront.

In regards to western idea of agro-business in Africa, Okolie concluded that the "concentration of land and other resources in a few hands and loss of lands by many peasants, technological and financial dependency, as well as unemployment since there were few industries to absorb the displaced. Little food was produced while more was

imported leading to more dependence on imported foods as well as on seeds and chemical, especially fertilizers” (Okolie, 2003, pp. 241)

The project totally disregarded the environment and the wild life; the local fishermen whose livelihood depends on the fish from the river were unable to catch any fishes. The dam totally destroyed the entire fish population; the fishermen have to find something new to depend on. The wild life that depends on the seasonal river flood was entirely destroyed by the dam.

The dream of rescuing primitive African agriculture and modernizing it has brought destruction to the environment. The new system of agriculture has no regard for the environment, instead it expatiated the destruction of African natural resources. The destruction of the natural resources will affect all Africans.

According to the World Bank, “one negative economic and livelihood impact of loss of forest ecosystem is the deterioration of watersheds, resulting in drought and flooding of the region’s 11 major multinational watersheds, 7 have lost more than 90 percent of their original forest cover and 4 have lost more than 99 percent” (Building a Sustainable Future, 2002)

These African governments and their western experts failed to examine the needs of the powerless and the now marginalized population. The project did not fulfill its mission of turning these countries into modern big agro-business states instead it added more debts on their already bankrupt countries. This kind of failed developments can be found all over Africa.

Another failed developmental path that needs to be reexamined by many African nations is their system of education. Africans at large adopted the colonial system of

education in which African were taught how to be servants to their European masters. The colonial schools taught Africans about basic rudimentary history of England in the case of The Gambia and of La France in the case of Senegal. The African students learned how to do some simple reading, writing and mathematics. The students who graduate from these colonial schools usually abandoned the traditional farming and join the local colonial administration.

African schools are teaching irrelevant subjects that have nothing to do with Africa. For instance I remembered in my school days in The Gambia, I remembered learning about the history of the British royal families, Admiral Nelson, British Parliamentary system and even about how to be an English gentleman. We even learned about the climate conditions of Europe especially England.

In regard to the educational system of Africa, Lall, Stewart & Wangwe (1992) describe it as “relatively poor quantity of education has been compounded by weak quality, with syllabuses, which for many years were copies of those of the colonial powers, often quite irrelevant to African needs, ill-educated teachers and limited equipment” (Lall, Stewart & Wangwe, 1992, pp. 34).

Agriculture which is the backbone of the Gambian society is a subject that is given a little consideration. Farming is usually considered to be a job of uneducated peasants therefore a majority of African youth will move to the city in search of employment. African schools should put more efforts in teaching agriculture for instance in countries like the Gambia where agriculture is the major source of employment.

It will benefit the development of Africa if African students would learn about some basics of modern agriculture, rearing of animals, and some carpentry. With this

practical knowledge every individual will have some useful thing to do when they left school. This will reduce the number of youths migrating from the rural areas to the cities.

Factors impeding sustainable development in Africa

Agriculture is the lifeblood of Africa, for Africa to start developing it first has to have the ability to feed itself. A responsible sustainable development which addresses the importance of the environment, the people and the whole ecosystem are the missing key in starting the engine of sustainable development in Africa.

Sustainable development in Africa can be accomplished but there are certain factors that are making the application of sustainable development in Africa impossible. The impeding factors of sustainable development in Africa are natural, structural, human factors and failed leadership.

Natural factors can be regarded as something induced by nature, it is also equally important to note that natural factors can be from the consequences of people. Afoaku et al define natural factors as “drought, excessive rain, poor soil conditions, and crop decline or loss of productivity due to pests and diseases” (Afoaku & Ukaga, 2005, pp. 193).

Desertification and deforestation are both natural factors that will seriously challenge the idea of sustainable development in Africa. Both of these natural conditions can be attributed to human activities as well as to natural events. Desertification is the process in which the once productive land turns into a desert. Unfortunately this process is occurring at an alarming rate in certain parts of Africa. For instance the Northern region of Senegal which was once favorable for agriculture is now entirely arid. A large

portion of this undesirable climate changes are caused by man. The cutting down of trees in that part of Senegal can be attributed to this problem.

Without examining the consequences of modern agriculture on delicate African soil, Senegal is cutting down trees to make a way for irrigated agro-business farms. As soon as salinization becomes a threat to this new modern industrial farming, they will simply cut down more trees. Desertification will continue to be a major threat to the security and sustainability of Africa unless Africans can comprehend the importance of the environment.

Deforestation is another factor that can impede sustainable development in Africa. The forest is very vital not only to Africa but also to the entire globe. The rain forest in Central Africa is under a daily assault from human activities. Trees are being cut down for timbers which are exported to industrial nations. Only a small fraction of individuals will benefit from this exploitation of the forest. On the other hand, those whose entire livelihood depends on the forest will suffer the consequences.

The loss of forest can drastically change the environment of Africa. The forest is usually the main cause of rain and rain is something that is currently holding the fragile continent of Africa together. The rain provides ground water for drinking; it replenishes the rivers and waters crops. Africans should realize the value of forests in African ecosystem, because without trees there will be no rain and that will be the slow and painful death to Africa.

Structural factor is another important issue impeding sustainable development in Africa. Afoaku et al looked at structural factors “as poor infrastructure, limited access to inputs and necessary technology, ineffective domestic markets, insufficient

investments, and unfavorable global trade and finance structure” (Afoaku & Ukaga, 2005, pp. 193).

For an effective sustainable development to take its roots in Africa certain important structural factors like good roads and effective domestic markets have to be in place. These two elements are the most important factors that many African nations should concentrate on developing. Well-planned developed roads will act like a catalyst in opening remote domestic markets.

In regards to road infrastructure African road systems are among the worst in the world. In the Gambia a common saying is that only a drunk will drive straight on the roads. The Gambian national highway which is the major artery of the nation is often impossible to travel especially during the raining season. Some parts of this major highway look like it has been bombarded. This horrendous road conditions always have negative consequences on the farmers because it is the only mean for them to transport their commodities to the markets.

In Afoaku et al, The Economist indicated that “poor transportation systems and bad roads make it difficult for farmers to get inputs into and produce out of their farms. Due to poor transportation and inadequate storage facilities, up to 40 percent of farm produce in Africa is wasted, while people go hungry only a few hundred miles from where surplus crops may be rotting” (Afoaku & Ukaga, 2005, pp. 196). This impeding structural factor can be regarded as one of the major issue which African countries like Gambia have to overcome before sustainable development can occur.

Perhaps one of the leading impeding factors that will continue make sustainable development in African impossible is the failed leadership and the corrupt nature of

African leaders. Either they are democratically elected to office or did so by force, it seems like African presidents have one thing in common which is the tendency and the desire to stay in power forever.

For instance the first president of the Gambia was elected to office at the end of colonialism and he ruled the country for over thirty years until he was ousted by the military. James (1999) pointed out that “one of the causes of conflicts in Africa is that leaders are not willing to give up their power, and opposition to them is interpreted as opposition to God. African leaders would like to believe that the office of the presidency is a life long property” (James, 1999, pp. 151).

Some people first welcome the idea of the military overthrowing these autocratic rulers because it is seen as the only method. The military was seen as saviors with the mission of disposing the corrupt and ineffective rulers. Unfortunately military takeovers turn out to be a nightmare. As James (1999) eloquently put “the reign of military administration in all the African states without a doubt is far worse than the colonialist they supplanted” (James, 1999, pp.151).

These military leaders often have very little education in addition to their lack of experience as leaders. For example the current president of the Gambia who ousted the first president only has a high school education. He was only thirty years old when he took over the presidency. How can a president that young, inexperienced and barely educated can be expected to make a sound decision that will benefit the entire population of the Gambia?

It turns out that he was as corrupt as the ousted president. Corruption is something that is crippling the development of Africa. In regard to corruption in Africa,

James (1999) viewed that “African leaders in both the military and the civilian governments along with their cohorts are the worst law breakers of all time. There is no level or section of African government that is free of corruption. It is the biggest problem confronting Africa and should not be ignored if sustainable development is the goal. It is destroying the fabric of African society like an incurable cancer” (James, 1999, pp. 152)

These corrupt leaders are stealing billions of dollars that are intended to go to the development of their nations and putting it into their overseas bank account. Former president Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire was not wealthy when he took office but during his presidency he became one of the world’s wealthiest people. Some people said that his account in a Swiss bank was worth over a billion dollars. This kind of reckless behavior and totally disregard for others continues to be the tool of the majority of African rulers.

Another impeding factor towards sustainable development in Africa is war. War totally destroys any accomplished development and frequently all of the resources are directed towards the war efforts. Afoaku et al (2005), describe the consequences of war on agriculture in five ways. The first thing is that wars “disrupt normal activities, thus inhibiting agricultural practice. Second, they usually turn farmlands into battlefields, rendering them unavailable or unsafe for agriculture. Third, they reduce human, material, financial and other resources that could be engaged in agriculture. Fourth, heavy war machines destroy farmland and make them less useful for agriculture. Fifth, land mines condemn farmlands and disable or kill those who try to farm such lands” (Afoaku & Ukaga, 2005, pp. 204).

A large portion of conflicts in Africa are ethnically and sometimes religiously driven. The colonial governments should be held partially responsible for ethnic

conflicts that are currently plaguing Africa. The formation of African countries without first examining the importance of ethnic and religious difference was a major mistake in the parts of the colonials. The French colonial system of favoring one ethnic group above others has resulted in a blood bath. For example “in 1994 Tutsis ethnic minority conflict with Hutus of Rwanda destroyed what was once a peaceful co-existence and brought unprecedented nightmare to a small country” (James, 1999, pp.149).

Sudan is an example of a nation that is experiencing the combination of both religious and ethnic conflicts. The conflict in Sudan has been going on for a long period of time and it seems like it will keep continuing. Thousands of people are displaced from their homes and are forced to entirely depend on foreign handouts for their survivals. This ethnic conflict is hindering Sudan’s ability to fully take the path of sustainable development.

How can sustainable development take its roots in Africa?

Africa has the potential to achieve some sustainable development, others might argue that Africa has been trying to develop since independence but have achieved nothing. Africa should be allowed to develop at her own pace rather than relying on some timetables designed by outsiders.

For sustainable development to take its roots in Africa the following conditions have to be addressed. Corruption has to be eradicated, conflicts and wars must end, education has to be geared towards African conditional needs, the environment has to be protected and agricultural conditions have to be compatible with African ecosystem. It is very important to understand that sustainable development in Africa has to include women.

Sustainable development goes hand in hand with effective sustainable agriculture as James (1999) points out, “the main reason for stressing the importance of agricultural sustainability is because food security is vital to the stability of African countries, although the reality in Africa is that governments are allocating a high proportion of their annual budgets towards military expenditures and unnecessary physical infrastructure constructions. Food security through efficient agricultural productions is paramount to sustainable development in Africa” (James, 1999, pp.4). Agriculture deserve a special attention, African governments should make it a priority in ensuring that the infrastructure is reliable for agricultural usage.

Protecting the environment should also be an important issue for African governments to consider. For instance the “government must prohibit cutting down large forest, and savanna tree plants with adventitious root should be replaced in highly erodible areas” (James, 1999, pp. 81).

Women are the lifeblood of Africa. If sustainable development is the goal, Africa has to realize the important roles that women can play towards attaining this goal. Through their ingenious entrepreneurial skills women in Africa are becoming the breadwinners for their families. In Iheduru (2001), the World Bank mentioned that “women are the key, says the Bank, to protecting the environment and alleviating poverty because they play a greater role in environmental management than in any other region of the world” (Iheduru, 2001, pp. 219).

Industrialized nations can also play a major role in helping Africa gear towards sustainable development. They can forgive African debts, put to an end the exportation

of armament into Africa and should consider working with and empowering the local African farmers instead of putting money into the hands of corrupt African governments.

Africans have no choice but to be hopeful for their future. For Africa to achieve sustainable development it has to eradicate all the impeding factors that are making sustainable development impossible

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