

Views on Development

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Is Africa developing: the need for a paradigm shift

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At a time when some are calling for the end of foreign aid to Africa, it seems important to think again about why, according to many, Africa appears not to be developing. Is the solution to the problem one of greater assistance, better institutions, a stronger state, less corruption or more dedicated leadership? Or is the problem to do with how we think of the process of development and how we conceptualise the ways in which it can be achieved?

In what follows I argue that rather than more aid, we need a paradigm shift in development aid. This shift has to start with a better understanding of the assumptions and standpoints driving Western efforts in Africa. It also involves a better understanding of the continent's history and of the causalities that underlie its development.

Is Africa developing?

There is disagreement on this question. The optimists argue that there has been a notable upswing in economic growth in Africa and that the incidence of civil war and warlordism has reduced, with great improvements in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. Democratisation in the form of multiparty elections has become established in most of the continent and great progress has been made in containing and treating HIV/Aids. The pessimists rebut these arguments and hold that GDP *per capita* has not increased, but income differentials and poverty have grown. Many civil conflicts, like Darfur or the DRC, linger on and criminal and gang violence is on

the increase; multiparty elections, for instance in Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire or Congo, have actually led to civil strife; and so long as poverty is widespread, there is little prospect that overall health in Africa will improve.

Such radical disagreements are puzzling. And at the very least, they point to the fact that in many ways we continue to be at a loss about how best to understand what is happening in Africa. But rather than add yet another voice to the debate as to whether Africa is making progress or not, I would like to reflect on a number of key concepts and highlight the importance of conceptualisation to the way in which we approach the question of development in Africa.

Development – what is it supposed to mean?

Even the most cursory reading of the literature on the subject points to an unseasonably wide range of possible definitions of development. There are at least two main perspectives at work here: one is primarily economic; the other essentially socio-political. Of course, the two are related and intertwined. But because the assumptions on which they rest are rarely discussed, the current debates are often a dialogue of the deaf. People argue at cross purposes.

The economic notion of development is straightforward: it focuses on a process of evolution that combines growth with a change in the nature of production from agricultural to

industrial. Development occurs when economic growth rises above population increase and becomes self-sustained. The socio-political approach to development argues for a broader and more inclusive notion. Here, development is equated with an increase in well-being and freedom rather than merely with income and industry. Although not denying the importance of economic growth, what matters most is the alleviation of poverty. This approach culminated in the setting of the Millennium Development Goals, which all focus on indicators of poverty, equality and social welfare rather than on growth.

The shift towards a more social definition of development went hand in hand with a reconsideration of the political factors that seemed to affect African countries. The move towards democratic politics was now seen as the first step towards economic development. At the same time, the test of whether there was development progress came increasingly to rest on two factors: the involvement of civil society in policy-making and the alleviation of poverty on the ground. This shift has led to a situation in which the analysis of Africa's condition has very little coherence. Depending on the analyst's standpoint, it has become possible simultaneously to point to either progress or failure of development. Sticking to a mainly economic perspective, it is not difficult to show that African countries, which in the sixties stood at a similar or higher level of GDP than many East Asian countries, have failed to achieve any kind of self-sustained growth. On the other hand, a primarily socio-political approach to development can point to strides in 'democratisation' and progress in some of the areas covered by the MDGs.

Why aid? Donors' politics and the justification of aid

The upshot here is that we no longer know what we are talking about when we talk of development. Western governments, international donors, NGOs and national aid agencies are all groping for definitions of development that will both account for what is happening on the ground and reflect some of the progress they want to believe is taking place in Africa. In other words, normative and ideological considerations have trumped the hard-

headed vision of the sixties' economists, who conceptualised development in terms of measurable criteria of self-sustained growth, investment and diversification. We have now reached a point where, caricaturing matters slightly, the donors are saying that there must be development because there is aid.

So, the very notion of development in Africa is now intimately tied to the question of foreign aid. But while the well-known geo-political and economic reasons for giving aid to Africa are discussed at length, there is very little attention paid to the donors' ideology, culture and ethics, which are of no little importance. Foreign aid is usually justified in terms of a combination of economic and ethical factors. The two apparent extremes are, on the one hand, China with its obvious interest in oil, minerals and land *and*, on the other hand, the Scandinavian countries, who see themselves as entirely disinterested donors, only bent on reducing inequalities and alleviating poverty.

The present hostility in the West towards China's foreign aid policy can help us focus on the importance of taking into account the donors' domestic ideology. The ostensible objection to current Chinese policy is that it is essentially 'bribing' Africa in order to get at its resources *and* that it is willing to do so regardless of the nature of the African regimes concerned, even when those are accused of massive human and political rights violations. However, this argument merely exposes the hypocrisy of Western donors who are equally interested in the continent's economic assets but are constrained in their aid policy by domestic considerations. Public opinion and parliamentary accountability in the West make it difficult to ignore the issues of development, poverty, probity, corruption and violence that make the headlines in the Western press and feed NGO advocacy. And the stronger the moral imperative to give, the stronger will be the need to *believe* that aid enhances development – that is, to adopt theories that link aid with development and, conversely, to reject theories that dispute that link.

Therefore, my point is that theories about the relevance of aid to development in Africa are often affected by factors that have to do with Western donors' self-image and the need of politicians in the West to demonstrate their charitable commitment. One compelling reason why some Western governments give aid, or even seek to increase the aid budget to 0.7 % of GDP, is quite simply because it is politically expedient to do so – regardless of the

evidence on the contribution of such aid to development. Hence the shock in the West when Dambisa Moyo published *Dead Aid: why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*. And whatever the validity of her argument, she has made a forceful point, which can no longer be ignored.

The imposition of the norms of Western accountability

Present theories of development, stressing as they do 'good governance', define democratisation in terms of accountability. The argument is simple: if politicians have to be elected, and re-elected, they will have to concern themselves with public demands and work for the greater benefit of the country. And indeed, at first sight it does seem that politicians today are very keen to get re-elected and that they do campaign on issues they believe to be of direct relevance to their constituencies. On occasion – though now increasingly rarely – politicians and governments are voted out of office, thus comforting the view that the electorate has sanctioned those who did not honour their commitments – that they have forced accountability on the politicians. The general view in the development and donor industry is that democratisation has indeed improved accountability, to the benefit of the ordinary people. Hence, the more elections there are, the more elections matter.

But this is a partial, not to say simplistic, analysis of what has happened in Africa – and this for three reasons: the first is that the projection of the Western concept of accountability upon Africa is not warranted; the second is that such an approach ignores what might be called informal forms of accountability, which are often more important; and the third is that the process of aid giving itself subverts the processes of accountability at work.

In post-colonial Africa, rulers established their legitimacy in the first instance because they brought independence to the continent. Afterwards, they held power through a judicious combination of patrimonialism and coercion. The relation between rulers and ruled never turned on the nexus between taxation and representation as it did in Western democracies. To this day taxation is but a relatively minor source of revenue and there is little meaningful correlation between paying tax and the delivery of services. The exercise of power remains essentially patrimonial, which

means that accountability is conceived in terms of what patrons can deliver to their clients. And, critically, both patrons and clients expect this relation to continue: patrons, because they need political support; clients, because in the absence of a functioning state providing public goods, the only avenue is to tap patrons.

As a result, the most important forms of accountability remain informal – by which I mean only that they are not part of our political theories of contemporary Africa. Informal accountability takes myriad forms, ranging from the need to favour one's community of origin over others to the demands that ancestors be propitiated in the proper manner. If, to use a particularly stark example, politicians fear the possibility of witchcraft in their village more than the electoral sanction of their constituency – in part because they know how to 'secure' the required votes – then it is clear that the accountability that matters is not that envisaged by the advocates of good governance.

More generally, as the governments in power learn how to 'manage' multiparty elections, the significance of electoral accountability becomes less compelling, even if elections do matter. In practice, the driving force of political accountability remains patrimonial, a fact that the development industry simply refuses to acknowledge. Much as the African Union's new strictures emphasise the importance of democratic accountability – in large part because this is what donors want to hear – the reality of power on the continent dictates that rulers are largely held to account in other ways.

Paradoxically, one of the greatest obstacles to effective accountability is precisely foreign aid. This is so for four reasons. In the first place, African governments are so dependent on foreign aid that they must prioritise accountability to their donors, not infrequently against their better judgement. Secondly, the so-called civil society sector in Africa is also almost wholly dependent on outside funding, and thus accountable to foreign NGOs. Third, the process of good governance imposed by donors undermines potential domestic accountability. For example, the PRSP mechanism gives more voice to CSOs (by and large chosen by the government) than to the elected parliament, which more often than not is left merely to rubber-stamp the decisions made by the executive. Finally, the overwhelming emphasis given by donors to elec-

toral competition induces politicians to do whatever it takes (including violence) in order to secure victory. But this subversion of the spirit of electoral democracy is not only detrimental to meaningful accountability, it is also a powerful demonstration of the limits of democracy. The result is that there is no reason for the ordinary voter to think that electoral democracy is anything other than a variant of patrimonial politics.

Some lessons

If our conceptualisation of key aspects of development in Africa is not just too narrow but also misleading, then it is important to ask how our approach to the question might be changed. My contention is that the main reason we are in need of a different perspective is because we continue to use theories that are decidedly deficient in terms of explaining the main political, social and economic processes on the continent.

a) Beware of the Western standpoint and learn how to work with the grain

What is striking about the present development models is that they all stem from the perspective of the West. This is of course not surprising. Since the intention behind foreign aid is to help African countries develop as rapidly as possible, if we can offer Africans shortcuts based on our own experience, why should they not benefit from the insights of our theories? But the issue of the standpoint is the greatest single impediment to a paradigmatic shift, which might make aid more productive than it has been in the last fifty years.

The consequences of the present Western standpoint are many. The most corrosive effect is that we approach African realities from the perspective of our own theories, seeking on the ground confirmation of what we have been taught should constitute the key economic and socio-political processes. For instance, even though economists have now accepted that the bulk of relevant economic activity in Africa is 'informal', they continue to employ standard economic theory to devise the policies that are supposed to bring about development. Similarly, the insistence on multiparty competition may turn out to be an obstacle to the creation of a political culture in which the ordinary people accept that Western-style democracy is better for them than the existing patrimonialism. Finally, the assumption that civil society is *per se* a key element in the democratisation of politics is simplistic. It is not clear that there is in Africa a

civil society on the European model. And the stress placed on the role of CSOs by donors has created a situation in which Africans have been busy 'inventing' a civil society intended to mirror the West's rather than working with CSOs that actually reflect the intricacies of local realities.

The illusion that our standpoint is universally valid is compounded by two factors. One is that, since funding is dependent on our African partners agreeing with the policies we advocate, it is in their interest to agree. Their agreement placates our belief that the problem in Africa is not our policy advice but the fact that it is not implemented properly. The second is that most Africans have been educated either in the West or in African higher education institutions that offer the Western curricula in economic, social and political sciences. Funding induces conformity, which is detrimental to insight.

Instead of focusing on how the continent can be made to fit the supposed requirements of a Western-style modernisation, we should be asking how development policies could be working with the grain, rather than against it. Here, the five-year ODI African Power and Politics research project funded by the DfID is a welcome first step. Its ambition is to find empirical evidence about the successful delivery of public goods in Africa, even where the process does not conform to good governance. One of the concepts that has emerged from an in-depth comparison of the experience of Asian and African countries since the sixties is 'developmental patrimonialism' – by which is meant that clientelism may not be an obstacle to development so long as rents are centralised and utilised for investment according to a long-term horizon.

(b) Gain better knowledge of African reality through a study of its history

Most development theories and policy recommendations are totally oblivious of history. If on occasion the impact of colonial rule is factored in the analysis, there is virtually no reference to the pre-colonial evolution of the continent. This makes it easy to forget that our theories are based on the Western historical experience, which means they may or may not be relevant to a setting as distinct as Africa, and it makes us blind to realities on the ground that most plainly matter for analysis and policy.

One well-known insight from history is that European and Asian countries developed

economically before they became democratic, under authoritarian and notoriously corrupt regimes. So, the current assumption that democratisation will favour development in Africa goes against the lessons of history. As for African history, it is important to assess, for instance, the relevance of different colonial systems to the operation and effectiveness of present day bureaucracies. It is well-nigh impossible to analyse political events in Nigeria since independence without a solid knowledge of the pre-colonial political, religious and ethnic divisions. There is far more continuity here than most policy papers suggest. Similarly, it would be pointless to address the question of land ownership and usage in the Ashanti region of Ghana without the relevant knowledge of how chiefly authority has conceived and managed that question over time, from long before colonial rule.

Similarly, it makes little sense to try to engage in peacekeeping or conflict resolution without a solid understanding of the long history underlying civil strife. Simple as it may appear to search its cause in terms of greed, grievance, ethnicity, resources, etc., it is often the case that conflicts are rooted in longstanding histories of rivalry, war and competition. For example, RENAMO in Mozambique was first thought of as a mere gang of bandits, then as an offshoot of the South African security forces, and finally as a political party aspiring to capture office. All these are true but the result of elections since 1994, with its striking regional divide, must be linked to the nineteenth-century conflict between the expanding Gaza empire and the much put-upon Shona speakers of the Zambezi region. That divide, which affected the war of national liberation, continues to have political resonance today.

(c) Challenge assumptions of developmental causal chains

Ultimately, when addressing the question of development, we need to address better the knotty problem of causality. Aid decisions are based on development policies and these policies derive from the theories that inform their validity. However, the development industry acts on the basis of assumptions they seldom discuss. A closer look at why such assumptions are made reveals that it is not because they are based on good theory. Rather, they derive from a combination of ideology within donor countries and the need to put forward constructive policies after the years of failed attempts to kick-start development in Africa. But good intentions are no

substitute for a hard look at which causalities are plausible and which are not. Development agencies need to challenge these assumptions much more thoroughly.

I have already suggested that two core assumptions of causality are at the very least open to serious questioning when considering the historical record: the conclusion that development is market- rather than state-driven; and the supposition that multiparty elections (democratisation) are a pre-requisite to development. Let me end with a look at two other assumptions made within the aid industry.

The first is that aid will facilitate development and that more aid will facilitate it even more. Here, one key problem is that no distinction is made about aid as a means of improving people's lives and aid as a trigger to development. There is an unstated presumption that the one will be instrumental in causing the other. But there is little evidence that the funding of programmes to enhance quality of life, or alleviate poverty, will result in activities that will sustain development. These are two different processes. And, as several analysts have suggested, aid may in fact act as a deterrent to policies conducive to sustained development. Moreover, poverty in the West and Asia only reduced significantly when economic progress gave working people more political power, with which to force authoritarian governments to devolve more resources to the poor. Seen in this way, it could be argued that a focus on poverty might be detrimental to development in two ways. One is that it relieves the governments concerned from their duties to their less well-off citizens, enabling the regimes to escape the wrath of those who might want to vent their anger against useless politicians – which would be a form of accountability. The other is that it deflects attention from policies needed for productive investment leading to sustained growth.

As a final example, the assumption that decentralisation is more effective than centrally controlled planning at spurring development, is questionable. It may be true that decentralisation gives greater local control over the use of resources, and even ensures that more central funding reaches the lower levels. But there is no solid evidence that such measures are causally beneficial to development, especially as local actors remain accountable to the central authorities. Of course, it is a good thing if local people can actually control the budgets of their schools and hospitals but the

quality of these institutions is still dependent on government investment in education and health. And in any event, better education and health can only be useful to development if/when there is scope for economic activities that will benefit both the individuals concerned and the country's economy.

Whatever our desire for the type of development that will bring Africans a better life and a more hopeful future, we need to be more vigilant about what we advocate – and why. I have suggested that one of the reasons for the failings of our (admittedly well-meaning) development advice is that we have not been able to come to terms with the limitations of the economic, social and political theories we employ. The weight of the unquestioned paradigm with which we work is probably one of the greatest obstacles to understanding the processes at work in Africa today and thus to offering better support to the African countries' own development. ■