



Africa's Development Dilemma on the Eve of the 21st Century: The Role of International Co-operation



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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this lecture by Professor Lydia Makhubu, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Swaziland, in a format that makes it available to a wider audience than those of us fortunate enough to hear her at the University of Guelph. The annual Hopper Lecture Series brings distinguished speakers to the University of Guelph and another Canadian university every fall through an endowment funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). In 1995, the partner university was McGill, where Professor Makhubu presented this lecture on October 26, 1995.

Professor Makhubu has had a distinguished career as a scientist, a leader in higher education, an internationalist and a commentator on science, technology and development, with particular reference to Africa. She is no stranger to Canada, having completed her M.Sc. and Ph.D. here. She has published significantly in both her scientific field of health and traditional healing and also in higher education. She has been a consultant to such agencies as the United Nations University, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa and several other UN bodies. In addition to serving her own country with distinction, Professor Makhubu has chaired the Association of Commonwealth Universities, has been a member of the boards of several international and Canadian agencies, including the Canadian Bureau for International Education and the Commonwealth of Learning. In recognition of her exemplary service, she has been awarded honorary degrees by Queen's, St. Mary's, Brandon and the University of Wales.

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I must express my sincere appreciation to the University of Guelph for inviting me to deliver this Third Hopper Lecture and for the warm hospitality which I have received since my arrival from Swaziland. As you have heard from Dr. Rozanski's kind introduction, my roots in Canada are deep and I always welcome an opportunity to visit any part of this country.

In reflecting on Africa's development progress after the independence of most African countries nearly three decades ago, and on the anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, I will attempt to bring into focus certain aspects of the role of the UN and how these have impinged upon African development during this time.

For the past two to three decades, development has been the critical password for Africa and other parts of the Third World. By proclaiming the first development decade in 1962 and the subsequent second and third decades, the United Nations embraced development as a concept to be vigorously pursued by all countries. Consequently, numerous programs and projects and a multiplicity of conferences were unleashed as strategies for transforming the Third World.

The United Nations specialized agencies have over the years devoted enormous amounts of money and other resources in order to promote the development process. It is indeed a truism that in Africa, where the ordinary citizen is quite frequently ignorant of the *raison d'être* and structure of the United Nations, the world organization is commonly known more for its assistance in the provision of basic survival necessities than its role in addressing global political concerns.

The United Nations has not been alone in advancing development assistance to African countries. Developed countries have played a critical role in providing bilateral assistance through a variety of projects and programs such as training, provision of technical inputs and other imperatives for stimulating economic growth and development. In addition, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to play a special role in providing assistance, particularly at grassroots level.

It is estimated that thousands of so-called experts, fielded by both governments of developed countries and NGOs and engaged in a variety of activities, still remain in Africa today. This has led many analysts to conclude that efforts at developing Africa have been propelled mainly from outside the African continent, and are in most cases based on foreign concepts. To the extent that endeavours at developing African countries have lacked indigenous nurturing, participation of stakeholders in their conception, and have been mainly donor-driven, this criticism is on the whole valid. Consequently, many donor-financed projects and programs have failed to take root and effectively contribute in a sustained and sustainable manner to the widespread advancement of the peoples of Africa. Failure to elaborate consistent and participatory forms of effective development intervention has been the bane of overseas assistance to Africa for a long time. Quite frequently, the dearth of indigenous skills in the design of projects has reinforced the poor performance of development aid.

This is Africa's development dilemma on the eve of the 21st century.

The United Nations: a brief background

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, we cannot but reflect on its role in world politics, its efforts at promoting world peace and stability, and its contribution to socio-economic development and international co-operation. The 1945 founding of the UN as successor to the League of Nations was a historic event designed to safeguard world peace after a devastating war which, according to Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary-General of the United Nations (1984), had threatened the very existence of modern civilization.

The United Nations charter became a blueprint to guide the conduct of international relations in order "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" (Preamble, United Nations Charter). It is now 50 years since this historic step was taken and the United Nations, despite its enormous fiscal difficulties, has grown into the only world body enjoying membership of almost all nation states. It continues to set guidelines for conduct on issues of fundamental importance to world relations and common interest for the survival and prosperity of all mankind. The United Nations has been severely criticized for ineffectiveness on certain issues of key importance to its mandate as a world body, but, despite this criticism, there is widespread recognition that no substitute body, possessing the same degree of cohesion and respect among members, has been found to discharge the functions of the United Nations (Luard, 1987). It remains the only organization which can openly admonish violators of international law without incurring outright and blatant violent retaliation from the alleged offenders. It is indeed the only credible organ for international expression where small and large countries can voice opinions and protests and take concrete positions on world matters.

As the membership of the United Nations has expanded from the initial 51 members to 186 in 1995, so has the divergence of interests and opinions among member nations based on religion, common interests and developmental aspirations. The emergence of interest groups such as the Group of 77 and the formation of regional commissions is a clear reflection of this fact.

The functions of the United Nations principal organs have altered with time to reflect the multiple changes in global affairs and the growing and changing interests of the diverse membership of the organization. The multiplicity and diversity of interests is most explicit and best expressed in the General Assembly where member states and interest groups raise a wide range of national, international and regional concerns.

United Nations specialized agencies

While the United Nations principal organs were growing and taking root, the organization's specialized agencies were also being formed, predicated on the argument that the mandate of the United Nations extended to social and economic areas as reflected in Article 55 and 56 of the UN Charter. These articles advocate the promotion of economic and social co-operation and "higher standards of living, full employment and conditions of economic and social progress and development" (UN Charter, Article 55). This rather wide-ranging mandate allowed the performance of equally wide-ranging tasks by the UN specialized agencies and a special and significant role in international co-operation.

The engagement of the United Nations in global debates on issues of concern to all humanity has helped to consolidate the organization's status as a world parliament. Meetings such as the Conference on Science and Technology for Development held in Vienna in 1979 even before the cessation of the Cold War are but a reflection

of the UN's concern for a global consensus on key developmental issues. More recently, the UN Conference on the Environment and Development held in Brazil in 1992, the UN Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, and the recent Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing reflect the organization's attempts at downplaying politics and elevating human-related concerns through "promoting higher standards of living, full employment and conditions of economic and social progress and development" (UN Charter, Article 55a).

The Cold War and development in Africa

The Security Council's restricted membership at the beginning was an attempt to balance powers of aggression among its members following the Second World War (Nicholas, 1975). By conferring veto power to five permanent members, it was assumed that the Security Council would be prevented from authorizing military actions against a permanent member or requiring the use of its forces against its will. Right from the onset, however, the Council faced an ideological conflict among the so-called superpowers, thus precipitating the Cold War, which for decades split the world along ideological lines. The East-West divisions permeated the entire United Nations, pre-determining positions taken by individual member states on virtually all issues of debate, especially on those decisions taken in the General Assembly. Resulting from the Cold War, the veto power became corrupted so much that it became an instrument for maintaining ideological patronage. As a consequence of the Cold War, ideological polarization became a firm foundation and a tool for the socio-economic development strategies of many Third World countries. This became particularly acute among the fragile economies of Africa, where most countries became independent soon after the start of the Cold War. Many leaders of African nations became classical guinea-pigs of the Cold War and adopted ideological stances which were to direct their socio-economic development for two to three decades. Much valuable time and resources, which should have been devoted to seeking and designing development strategies in line with African realities, were spent in ideological gymnastics and appeasing ideological masters. Consequently, this obsession with ideology very often resulted in a serious erosion of Africa's potential for economic development and squandered her opportunities for gaining political respectability in the world (Final Report of the UN University-Sponsored Special Committee on Africa, 1986).

Three decades of African development

A clear examination of Africa's development performance in the post-independence period will shed light on the roots of the current dilemma. The post-independence period was a critical time when most African countries were attempting to balance politics and economics in situations of abundant natural resources but deficient human resources and weak institutional capacities. With intense East-West ideological polarization, socialism and capitalism or their modified versions became central to the development paths of most African countries. African leaders drew inspiration from these ideologies to define the "relationship between state and society and even a purpose of life" (Final Report of UN-Sponsored Special Committee on Africa, 1986). Socialism was attractive to many African leaders because of its emphasis on equality and social justice and because of similarity to African communalism. In certain instances, attempts to integrate or blend socialism and African traditional communalism were made with a view to producing development paradigms to guide the newly independent states (UN University Special Committee on Africa, 1986).

While this integration was a welcome ideal for countries in social transition, the lack of strong analytical and adaptive capacities at the time gave rise to the dominance of external over indigenous concepts and failure to establish proper linkage between political theory and practical social and cultural African realities. An environment hostile to the growth of indigenous thought and innovation was thus created very early in the development path of African nations and led to the promotion of development strategies based exclusively on non-African experiences. The United Nations agencies have been part of the foreign onslaught on Africa through the supply of experts with numerous ideas on every sector.

Development in Africa thus assumed different specifications depending on the perceptions of external organizations and experts who swamped the continent. These experts -- including UN experts -- have run development experiments based on fads and simplistically crafted solutions. At different times, development has been perceived as civilization, Europeanization, westernization, industrialization etc. (Ajayi, Goma and Johnson, 1995). All of these have given rise to varied emphases in the implementation of programs. Some programs have emphasized rural development where attempts to introduce new ideas into traditional rural settings -- sometimes with total disregard for traditional practices, beliefs and norms -- have been made. Others have advocated the building of turn-key industries and the transfer of technology without the indigenous management and technical capacities to run them. Some programs, in particular UN-sponsored programs, have concentrated on promoting the integration of women in development, as if women were a separate arm of society delinked from the socio-cultural considerations that are so much a part of African traditions. Needless to say, such approaches have directly or indirectly denigrated indigenous ideas as if Africa had no concepts of her own which could have formed the foundation for progress. Such denigration has been so destructive over the years that contemporary sub-Saharan Africa now appears to have lost her capacity to retrace her steps in search of a new framework for development based on her own experience.

A justified question might well be asked: Why did African leaders of the calibre of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda allow themselves to be dragged so deeply into this development quagmire? It is fair to say that the 1960s saw remarkable achievements with respect to the expansion of social services, such as education and health, and in the construction of physical infrastructure. It must be recognized that many countries were starting from rock bottom and it was crucial to evolve social and economic policies to sustain and maintain the initial progress and momentum. Regrettably, this did not happen. A combination of internal and external factors hampered the maintenance of the progress that was achieved in the early years of independence.

Political instability shifted attention away from economic and developmental issues to politics, resulting in a major diversion of resources from social and economic sectors to military expenditure. Many countries, therefore, began to seek foreign assistance to support social services, thus exposing themselves to donor dictation on policies

governing vital sectors of development. Agriculture, a sector on which almost all countries depend for food, energy, industry, employment and foreign exchange, did not receive the necessary attention and investment it deserved. Agricultural production declined sharply to 1.1 per cent between the years 1977 and 1980 and the welcome recovery to 2.5 per cent in 1980-90 persistently fell short of the population growth rate of three per cent per annum (The Global Coalition for Africa Annual Report, 1992). At independence, many countries relied heavily on the export of primary commodities to earn foreign currency. The fluctuating and often depressed prices of these commodities, prompted mainly by exogenous factors such as the world recession of the 1980s, precipitated an economic crisis from which Africa has been unable to recover (Final Report of the UN University-Sponsored Special Committee on Africa, 1986). With depressed agricultural production, many countries began to increase the importation of food and other basic commodities and even resorted to heavy borrowing in order to pay for the imports and social services. This has led to the heavy external debt which has become Africa's nightmare. A general socio-economic decline followed, exacerbated by natural disasters such as the drought which has persisted in many parts of the continent to the present day. Famine, hunger, disease, high infant and maternal mortality -- problems which directly impinge on the human condition -- became the hallmark of the continent. All socio-economic indicators spell doom for Africa on the eve of the 21st century.

As a measure to curb the decline, the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) imposed structural adjustment programs as a condition for further lending and provision of resources in many African countries. The effects of structural adjustment on many countries are still a subject of intense debate in the continent.

The way forward

In the light of these challenges, Africans are now determined to revisit the past and search for inspiration from their own culture, experience and thought in order to construct a vision of a future for Africa. Several groups have met and reflected on the best way forward. These reflections are, however, made with a keen awareness of global interdependence as a modern phenomenon, facilitated by technological advances which link people and nations more closely now than ever before. Global interdependence has become such a contemporary reality, especially in knowledge generation and utilization, that Africa's search for her own framework of development cannot suggest delinking from the rest of the world but rather must seek co-operation to implement her own development plans and strategies. It is no longer a viable option for Africa to adopt the world-view of other peoples (Thomas Odhiambo, 1994). She should rather assume a more pro-active stance in elaborating typically African solutions and blending them with attractive options produced elsewhere.

Odhiambo asserts strongly that a vital component of this blending is knowledge -- "knowledge as a utility, knowledge as the means to obtain economic and social results." Empowering people with knowledge to direct their own destiny must become Africa's priority and challenge in the coming decades.

The following question must be asked: How can the people of sub-Saharan Africa, in their large numbers, be mobilized and empowered to extricate themselves from the inescapable doom which all socio-economists are forecasting on the eve of the 21st century?

An emerging contradiction of interdependence and international co-operation

While global interdependence is a modern reality, there is, however, an emerging contradiction which has surfaced after the demise of the Cold War. Nationalism and regionalism are becoming strong forces that are fast replacing East-West alignments and in many ways eroding the basis for true international co-operation. In this context, Pan-Africanism assumes a special importance in the creation of an African vision for the future. With the liberation of South Africa, a strong economic power, regional alignments such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Southern African Customs Union (SACU), Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), and Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), even the Organization of African Unity (OAU) itself, became viable alternatives to be strengthened so as to facilitate regional integration. The creation of a critical mass of human and institutional capacities is imperative for the generation of Africa's own knowledge store for local application and contribution to world knowledge and international co-operation.

Strategic options for the future

The empowerment of people with knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in their own development is a strategic option for African development in the future. This empowerment should target, in particular, lower socio-economic levels of society, to include the majority of people. In this context, four areas are perceived as critical in the formulation of options for the future. These are subsistence agriculture, the peri-urban informal sector, science and technology, and higher education, including the higher education of women.

The need to build Africa's stock of human capital is reinforced by statistics which show that Africa lags behind all regions of the world with respect to enrolment in higher education, science and technology, in particular the numbers of women in these areas. With this paucity of intellectual and scientific and technological leadership, Africa cannot hope to overcome her daunting challenges. These must be faced by the Africans themselves, and cannot be delegated to outside experts. The experience of the past must serve as the framework for a vision of a future in which Africans take the lead in the design of fresh strategies for the revitalization of the continent. International co-operation involving the United Nations will remain a key and essential factor in the success of these strategies.

I will end by quoting from the foreword of the 1992 Annual Report of the Global Coalition for Africa to reiterate the crucial role of international co-operation.

Today, most countries in sub-Sahara Africa lie somewhere between collapse and full potential and only a rededicated partnership for serious and co-ordinated action can prevent the collapse and unlock the potential.

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