

Rethinking development in Africa

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Abstract: The traditional approach to development in Africa is facing challenges that question its efficacy. Suggesting a shift from traditional development narratives to one where inclusivity, especially with a young demographic, is pivotal for sustainable development. Traditional development metrics are also insufficient and the future of aid looks uncertain, with a shift towards military support, especially in the Sahel region. Consequently, there are concerns about the effectiveness and focus of the multilateral system, with progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lagging behind expectations. Responding to these challenges, Africa is emphasizing regional integration, exemplified by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), to unlock regional-level solutions in various sectors and a collective African voice. Moreover, the empowerment of grassroots communities and a redefinition of the roles of state entities, is crucial. Therefore, as Africa refocuses its development paradigm, addressing systemic barriers to justice, championing transparency, and ensuring equality are foundational to achieving sustainable progress and fostering an inclusive society.

Keywords: Demographic shift, inequalities, youth, development narratives, regional integration, local empowerment

Rethinking development in Africa is a pressing issue that challenges the effectiveness of traditional approaches. While we have a general understanding of technical solutions, relying solely on them no longer enables us to fulfil our development agenda. This raises the question of whether we should continue adhering to classical definitions of development.

A few years ago, I commissioned a study with the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures to

explore Africa's development scenarios in the context of present-day realities. We examined the critical transitions underway on the continent, identifying five main ones.

The first transition is the demographic shift. Currently, Africa is home to 50% of the world's population under the age of 18, and with current growth rates between 2.8% and 3.2%, the continent's population is projected to double by 2050. This poses significant challenges, particularly for countries

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like Mali, where a high population growth rate strains the job market. With approximately 250,000 to 300,000 educated young people entering the workforce in Mali each year, the limited industry and predominantly rural population exacerbate the employment crisis. To address this, agricultural transformation and diversification of the rural economy must become central policy priorities. It's important to note that the accelerating nature of this demographic transition complicates the task of designing governance systems that can effectively respond to the challenges.

The second transition pertains to human development and inequality. Africa remains one of the most unequal regions globally, with the number of poor people increasing despite relative reductions in poverty rates. While progress has been made in areas such as health and education, a significant proportion of Africa's population still struggles with poverty. Combining the demographic and inequality challenges creates a complex equation that requires careful policymaking.

The third transition is the technological shift. Despite being a fragile country, a country like Somalia boasts the highest density of cell phones on the continent, surpassing countries like Egypt, South Africa, and Kenya. This example demonstrates the profound impact technology can have. Today's youth, particularly in countries like South Africa, are connected and aware of developments in neighbouring nations. This newfound social connectivity presents a novel dimension for

governance, one that governments were not confronted with two decades ago.

The fourth transition centers around natural resources, specifically the impact of climate change on critical resources and agricultural systems in Africa. The continent currently imports around \$35 billion worth of agricultural products, and although crop yields have improved, they remain insufficient. Addressing food security becomes crucial in designing policies that can effectively reduce poverty and promote inclusivity.

A fifth transition, interconnected with the previous four, is the governance transition. Governance systems are evolving across the African continent, but the outcome remains uncertain. The doubling of Africa's population by 2050 will significantly impact governance systems, and it's crucial to avoid governing societies with a median age of 19 in the same manner as those with a median age over 40. The widening gap between the demands of the youth population and the capacity of public administration poses a potential source of instability. Shifting power dynamics have already been observed, with a move from centralized governments to local authorities and organized youth.

The above transitions will be critical in rethinking the way we design policies, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of the process and in how governments design their policies.

Governance and power relations

Instances such as Tunisia's experience highlight the fragility of governance

systems. Despite being perceived as a model of development, Tunisia faced implosion, and the reasons behind it remain under analysis. The negative perceptions of young people towards governance systems may have played a role. Consequently, relying solely on traditional development indicators to gauge success is no longer sufficient. Perception cannot be disregarded by policymakers, and power dynamics in Africa, influenced by demographic transitions, are constantly changing.

Tunisia serves as a prime example of development success. It received recognition and praise from institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, and the African Development Bank. Tunisia's achievements included high IT penetration, excellent literacy rates for girls, robust agricultural production with significant exports to Europe, and well-developed infrastructure comprising quality ports and airports. It was considered a model of development and appeared to be on a promising path.

Tunisia's unfortunate implosion continues to be analysed, with no consensus on its exact causes. Was it due to governance shortcomings, the dictatorship of Ben Ali, or high unemployment levels? The crucial point is that a potentially "developed" country in Africa experienced a failure and collapse. This could have been influenced by the negative perceptions of the country's governance systems among the youth. Tunisia serves as a warning for other African nations. Traditional development indicators are no longer sufficient in light of the youth's evolving role. Governments may believe they have the power to drive

change, but if they lack the ability to do so, it signifies inadequate governance systems. To address these issues, a shift of power has been observed, moving from centralized governments to local authorities, communities, and especially the organized youth. It is evident that governance systems cannot be effectively changed in a top-down manner if they are perceived as inadequate.

Examining the presence of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Cameroon, the South of Niger, and Chad reveals a troubling fact: the median age of a Boko Haram fighter is just 16 years old. According to the UNDP, these young individuals earn more than \$3 a day, possess Kalashnikov rifles, and reside in territories that have been neglected by development initiatives. Such cases highlight the limitations of the traditional development model. Governance plays a pivotal role in addressing this issue.

Two compelling examples that underscore this are the Central African Republic and Botswana.

Despite their similarities in size, population density, and mineral resources, Botswana and the Central African Republic (CAR) have taken divergent paths since gaining independence around the same time. At the onset, both countries had a GDP per capita of \$400. However, Botswana's GDP per capita has surged by a factor of 20, now standing at approximately \$8,000. In contrast, the CAR's GDP per capita has plummeted by half, currently hovering around \$200. These contrasting trajectories demonstrate how countries on the same continent, inhabited by the same Africans, can experience significantly

different outcomes in their development journeys.

Botswana stands out in a unique way due to its policy design and implementation, which prioritize inclusivity—a dimension that the Central African Republic (CAR) lacks. In terms of governance systems on a global scale, most African countries can be classified into two categories: those resembling Botswana in their policies and those similar to the CAR. The presence of more countries adopting governance systems like Botswana's will lead to increased emphasis on inclusivity in Africa's development trajectory. Botswana's governance systems, policy design, and implementation processes embody a crucial dimension of inclusivity, setting it apart from countries like Tunisia that experienced an implosion. The government of Botswana holds the power to drive change due to the central role inclusivity plays in its governance system. As power relationships have shifted, it has become clear that inclusivity is an essential prerequisite for sustainability within a young population. These realizations have sparked a paradigm shift in our approach to development, diverging significantly from the conventional wisdom of several decades ago.

The ODA - system

As Africa navigates through critical transitions and evolving power dynamics, it becomes crucial to scrutinize the design process of development policies. Additionally, the uncertainties of global cooperation present another significant issue. Aid has long been a

vital component of our development strategies. However, many African governments are increasingly convinced that aid, in its current form, may likely diminish within the next decade. In fact, considering data from DAC and OECD, it is already on the decline. Moreover, we are witnessing a transformation of traditional aid into military support, particularly evident in the Sahel region of West Africa. A substantial portion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided to the Sahel is now linked to military objectives. Consequently, the development dimension of the multilateral system is being critically questioned.

From a rules-based multilateralism to regional powerhouses

The traditional multilateral system is currently grappling with significant challenges as powerful national actors question its role and effectiveness. The sustainability of this system, with its core project, is now uncertain. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embody a universal agenda that should be embraced and implemented by diverse countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Malawi, and the United States of America. However, when evaluating progress through various reports, it becomes evident that we are falling far behind, especially compared to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In the face of global uncertainty, Africa is shifting its focus towards an internal agenda, prioritizing its own developmental aspirations.

A concrete illustration of this shift is the establishment of the African Free Trade Agreement. Although it will require considerable time and effort to operationalize the agreement and establish harmonization processes, we are committed to progressing towards a free trade area. We firmly believe that reimagining development entails strengthening our regional internal markets. It is within these markets that we can foster a learning curve in terms of competitiveness, enabling us to assume a significant role in an increasingly globalized world characterized by heightened uncertainty.

In light of the challenges we face, we are compelled to prioritize the objective of regional integration, a pursuit we have been engaged in since the 1960s. We recognize that one of the primary hindrances to Africa's overall development is its fragmentation. Therefore, it is crucial for us to pursue regional solutions as they offer the most effective pathways forward in various sectors such as education, energy, transport, and more. By embracing regional integration, we can unlock the optimal solutions that lie at the regional level, paving the way for comprehensive development across the continent.

The new leadership

By actively engaging in regional solutions, national governments can regain credibility and foster successful processes of democratization. As regional blocks gain greater influence and power, they can effectively shape leadership dynamics at the national level. This shift towards

regional cooperation not only strengthens the collective voice of African nations but also creates a platform for shared decision-making and collaborative problem-solving. Ultimately, by empowering regional entities, we can contribute to the development of accountable and responsive leadership at both the regional and national levels, promoting stability, progress, and effective governance.

Inclusivity

In reevaluating our perspective on development, we must consider the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their connection to environmental issues. The question arises as to whether this "classical development" approach will continue to dominate or if alternative approaches will emerge. The traditional development industry is facing significant scrutiny from local actors across Africa, spanning from North to South, East to Central. The credibility of the old team of donors, partners, and governments is notably low among today's youth.

This shift in perception demands a critical examination of how we perceive and pursue development. It calls for a departure from conventional models and a reimagining of innovative approaches that align with the aspirations and priorities of local communities. Engaging with the SDGs and incorporating environmental considerations will be key in this process. By placing emphasis on inclusive and participatory development, we can create more meaningful and impactful outcomes that resonate with the aspirations of the youth and address the pressing challenges of our time.

To effectively rethink development, it is imperative to prioritize inclusivity as a fundamental principle. Inclusivity is not an abstract concept; rather, it can be tangibly manifested through specific processes. The traditional top-down approach to designing education policies, health policies, and others has often been met with resistance from the majority of the population. Inclusivity, in this context, necessitates the co-production of public policies by governments and all relevant stakeholders at the national and local levels.

To bridge the gap between technological solutions and their effective implementation, political solutions must also be considered. This entails a comprehensive review of governance systems, placing inclusivity at their core. This paradigm shift is essential if we are to meet the expectations of the youth and actively pursue the Agenda 2063, a shared vision for Africa's development.

Reinventing governance systems

To ensure active participation in the development agenda, Africa needs to reinvent its governance systems. These new systems should embrace two essential dimensions: empowering local communities at the grassroots level and redefining the roles of the state, governments, and the need for inclusivity at the regional level. This transformation should prioritize bottom-up approaches rather than top-down directives. It is worth noting that Botswana's impressive \$8,000 per capita GDP is not solely attributed to diamond exports but is rather a result of leadership and governance

that prioritized the preservation of people's dignity.

As an example of inclusive planning, during my tenure as Prime Minister in 1998, we conducted a comprehensive survey in Niger as part of our three-year planning process. Rather than delegating the plan's design solely to experts, we actively sought input from the population to understand their priorities. This seven-month survey was conducted nationwide, with the anticipation of identifying key areas of focus. Interestingly, our assumptions about national priorities were challenged, as different regions prioritized water, agricultural production, and land issues differently. This demonstrated the importance of listening to the diverse voices and perspectives of the population in shaping effective policies.

Surprisingly, our findings revealed that justice emerged as the foremost priority in all regions, surpassing water, education, and infrastructure. This unexpected result emphasized the critical importance of addressing justice-related issues in our development efforts. It highlighted the deep-rooted desire within communities for fairness, equality, and a legal system that upholds their rights. Recognizing this prioritization of justice is essential for creating a society where individuals can thrive, trust is fostered, and social cohesion is strengthened.

Rethinking development in Africa necessitates a comprehensive reevaluation of justice in its entirety. Justice should be viewed holistically, encompassing not only the legal system but also social, economic, and political dimensions. It

is imperative to address the systemic barriers and inequalities that hinder access to justice, promote transparency and accountability, and ensure fair and equitable outcomes for all individuals. By placing justice at the forefront of our development agenda, we can create a more inclusive and just society, empowering individuals and fostering sustainable progress for Africa as a whole.

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