

Major challenges facing Africa in the 21st century: A few provocative remarks

Ibrahim Farah, Sylvia Kiamba and Kesegofetse Mazongo¹

**At the International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy in Africa - Strategies to
confront the Challenges of the 21st Century: Does Africa have what is required?**

Berlin, 14th – 17th July, 2011

Introduction

Western civilisation and culture began to creep into Africa when foreigners,¹-- mainly Europeans -- quest were aimed at imposing imperial ideologies and pilfering African resources. Since then, African scholars argued that this practice continued even after independence in the continent. A number of challenges face the continent in the 21st century. These include colonial legacy; foreign aid; foreign direct investment (FDI); the climate change debate, Africa and the challenge of the MDGs; and cultural diplomacy as a new tool.

This paper attempts to make a few provocative remarks on some of the key debates forming these issues. The paper argues that whether the continent is up on its tasks or not, there is lack of visionary leadership on the African side while Europe has been honest about its interests more than a mutually-agreed partnership with the continent.

Colonial legacy

Colonization distorted and retarded the pace and tempo of cultural growth and the trend of civilisation in Africa. The consequences of colonization have resulted in political of the colonies which led to an unbridgeable cultural gap between the beneficiary nations and

¹ Dr. Ibrahim Farah is a Nairobi-based academic whose areas of interest include foreign policy analysis, conflict studies and environmental diplomacy while Ms. Sylvia Kiamba and Mr. Kesegofetse Mazongo are postgraduate students at the University of Nairobi.

victims of the practice. The era of colonization pillage and plunder led to the relative stagnation and often decline of traditional cultural pursuits in the colonies.

Mimiko asserts that:

The social fabric was completely devastated and a new culture of violence was implanted. Traditional African systems of conflict resolution were destroyed and, in their places, nothing was given. The democratic process, rudimentary though it was, but with great potential as accompanies every human institution, was brutally uprooted and replaced by the authoritarianism of colonialism. A new crop of elites was created, nurtured, and weaned on the altar of violence and colonialism armed with the structures of the modern state to continue to carry out the art and act of subjugation of the mass of the people in the service of colonialism.ⁱ

The above assertion was supported by Kasongo who argues “one could infer that while westernization was imported to African countries, the hidden side of modernism was materialistic interest.ⁱⁱ To Kazonog, civilization was just another concept of domination, imposition of incoming new culture over traditional values.ⁱⁱⁱ Standage, on the other hand, posits that the historical context of westernization in Africa with Europe was through the Atlantic slave trade, missionary and imperialism. The forced acceleration of the black populations into the new world represented the sustained assimilation of western culture by Africans.^{iv}

Not that was all bad, however. Arowolo states that the colonial factor was essential in the understanding of the process of westernization in Africa. As a result, the effectiveness of colonization in changing the sphere of life in African societies is not hard to establish.^v Its political effects include western civilization being submerged and with the dismantling of indigenous institutions and cultures by instilling foreign rule. There was also the introduction of liberal democracy that did not necessarily work in Africa, not because Africa did not have its own pattern of democracy before the imposition of liberal democracy, but the typical democracy in Africa and its processes were also submerged by westernization.^{vi}

Mimiko insisted on the same argument by stating that:

But the point is that the so-called Kabiyesi syndrome, which has been accorded as an explanation for the shortage of democracy in contemporary Africa is actually a betrayal of inadequate understanding of the workings of the African traditional political systems. I strongly dispute this proposition as unhistorical and therefore invalid in the context of Africa. Our hypothesis is that in the epoch before contact between Europe and Africa, the latter not only developed relatively advanced state structures, but that emergent pre-colonial African states also had “sophisticated systems of political rule” with strong democratic foundations. I argue that the basis of the advertised inability of these societies to sustain democracy in contemporary (postcolonial) times could not have consisted in the absence of a democratic culture on their part. Rather, it is the residue of constraints that were attendant upon imperialism, which has been the dominant experience of the African peoples since the fourteenth century – defined most profoundly by slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and their handmaiden, military governance.^{vii}

Economic effects of colonialism

The economic effects of colonialism can be viewed as a progressive integration of Africa into the world capitalist system within which Africa functioned primarily as a source of raw materials for western industrial production. The colonial economy also caused agriculture to be diverted towards the production of primary products and cash crops, a situation that contributed to hunger and starvation in Africa. Africa concentrated on producing more of what was needed less and produced less of what was needed most. Africa was perpetually turned to the production of raw materials, a situation that caused unequal exchange in -- and balance of -- trade.

Rodney suggests that the plunderage and systemically corrupt enterprises established in the colonies to expropriate natural resources in Africa to Europe have facilitated underdevelopment of Africa while it engendered the development of Europe.^{viii} Alkali argues that colonization demanded a total re-organization of the African economy. Even in its current situation, life as an economic plan altered the way people produce, create and consume.^{ix}

Neo-liberalism also cropped up in African societies which was just an economic process that distrusts the state as a factor in development. It can be seen just as a philosophy

that can be re-packaged over the years with the aim being to make people believe that the market mechanism is the most efficient allocator of production resources and therefore to have an efficient and effective economy, forces of demand and supply must be allowed to play a leading role. This has also changed economies of African countries from communalism to capitalism and then to neo-liberalism.

Social effects

The social effects of colonialism led to many challenges that included individualism of families in an otherwise close knit-family structures, fragmentation of family/social relations and rapid urbanization that has resulted into rural exodus and displacement of large segments of the population. Proficiency in African languages is declining in the continent because people are compelled to embrace western culture and civilization. This has caused alienation for people who cannot speak foreign languages as language has been used as a vehicle of culture which has literally created a dichotomy between the elite and the masses.

Obadina argues that alien models imposed by colonialism laid seeds for a political crisis in Africa..... By redrawing the map of Africa and grouping diverse people together, ethnic conflicts were created that are now destabilizing the continent.^x Some have argued that it was the allure of modernity with its promise of greater material benefit that subverted African societies during colonialism. It is impossible to imagine what would have been the shape of contemporary African history had colonial rule never had taken place. Some western historians have argued that less developed regions of the world, particularly Africa lacked the social and economic organization to transform themselves into modern states able to develop onto advanced economies.

Foreign Aid

The nature of inter-independence of nations makes it necessary for the granting of aid to needy countries. Neo-Marxists have always argued that the advancement of developed countries' economies have also facilitated the same measure as the under-development of the third world through colonialism, slave trade and unequal exchange of trade. The third world has acquired substantial amount of both internal and external debt, partly caused by foreign aid from countries in the West. The aid relationship has created a condition of economic subservience and of a master-servant relationship that could generate persistent seeking and lobbying for foreign aid through borrowing.

Moyo argues that aid was not working in Africa because it interfered with development as the money always ended up in the hands of a small chosen few, making aid a form of taxing the poor in the west to enrich the new elites in former colonies.^{xi} Peter Bauer, one of the earliest critics of aid argued most strongly that aid- based theories and policies were wholly inconsistent with sound economic reasoning and indeed with reality.^{xii} The author and former World Bank economist Bill Easterly has provided numerous case studies on the failures of aid policies across the developing world. Paul Collier criticizes the blanket one-size-fits-all aid approach as paying no heed to the unique circumstances of individual countries, and thus proposes a more nuanced approach to aid driven proposals, and only where they are needed.

Moyo argues that the mistake the west made was giving something for nothing. The secret of china's success is that the foray into Africa is all business. The west sent aid to Africa and ultimately did not care about the outcome, with aid excluding the majority of the people from wealth, leading to political instability. China on the other hand, sends cash to Africa and demands returns. With returns, Africans gets jobs, roads, food, making them better off and the promise f some semblance of political stability. Places like Singapore have shown

that even in the absence of democracy, peace prevails when the median citizen is economically better off.

Calderisi posits that few aid initiatives are well thought out and the money rarely reaches its intended target.^{xiii} He points out that the frequent theme of international has been how to measure the impact of aid more effectively, a disguised complaint that suggests that current yardsticks are not giving the right results.^{xiv}

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

Average annual inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Africa doubled in the 1980s compared with the 1970s. It also increased significantly in the 1990s and in the period 2000–2003. Comparisons with global flows and those of other regions may be more useful, however. In the mid 1970s, Africa’s share of global FDI was about 6 percent, a level that fell to the current 2–3 percent. Among developing countries, Africa’s share of FDI in 1976 was about 28 percent; it is now less than 9 percent.^{xv} Also in comparison with all other developing regions, Africa has remained aid dependent, with FDI lagging behind official development assistance (ODA). Between 1970 and 2003, FDI accounted for just one fifth of all capital flows to Africa. It is well known that FDI is one of the most dynamic international resource flows to developing countries.

FDI is particularly important because it is a package of tangible and intangible assets and because firms deploying them are important players in the global economy. There is considerable evidence that FDI can affect growth and development by complementing domestic investment and by facilitating trade and transfer of knowledge and technology.^{xvi} The importance of FDI is envisioned in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), as it is perceived to be a key resource for the translation NEPAD’s vision of growth and development into reality. This is because Africa, like many other developing

regions of the world, needs a substantial inflow of external resources in order to fill the saving and foreign exchange gaps and leapfrogs itself to sustainable growth levels in order to eliminate its current pervasive poverty.^{xvii}

The Climate change debate, Africa and the MDGs

Climate change has raised a debate among African countries, the main concern being how to balance between economic development and environmental sustainability. Developing countries have argued in many environmental summits that developed countries reached their level of development at the expense of developing countries in what was called the brown way of economic growth. Developing countries have argued that they need to follow the same path for them to industrialize and reach desired levels of development.

With the debate on reducing emissions, developing countries have demanded four aspects to be met for them to comply with the demands of the West. First they want financing for adaptation, mitigation, capacity building and technology transfer, demands that the west have been reluctant to finance. With the emerging economies, the BRICS, there is likely to be no deal on climate change negotiations unless they can compromise and reach an agreement, so the momentum is with developing countries, to use forums as the G77 and China to push for a more favourable deal when it comes to climate change negotiations.

With the green economy concept likely to dominate the sustainable development agenda in future, developing countries need to rally together for them to influence the outcome of the negotiations. It should be noted that developing countries pollute less than the developed countries.

The emerging picture of Africa in the MDG report^{xviii} portrays a continent that has secured progress in key areas such as net primary enrolment, gender parity in primary education, political empowerment of women, access to safe drinking water, and stemming the

spread of HIV/AIDS. Antiretroviral treatment is becoming available in a large number of countries and maternal mortality rates are falling in some places.

The report draws attention to policy innovations in Africa that are facilitating progress toward attainment of the MDGs. These innovations include new and expanded social protection programs, which were once thought to be unaffordable to most poor countries but are now embraced as important additional interventions to secure progress on key human development indicators. In addition, countries have used the MDGs as a framework for development planning, strengthening coordination and cascading the MDGs to lower tiers of government.

Cultural diplomacy

In the period of European domination of the world, non-European countries acquired a great deal of European culture, values and technology. Now that the European hegemony has declined, previously existing cultures, traditions will manifest themselves again to some extent, adapted and hybridized with European ones; the question to ask is to what extent? Watson has indicated that Thinkers like Toynbee, Spengler and Bozeman have argued that the deep seated traditions and thought patterns of cultures and civilization are not easily modified at all, and remain substantially intact even when they adopt techniques and ideas from others.^{xix}

Chandra has argued that in the beginning, globalization was supposed to bring about peace and harmony and basically lead to cultural diffusion, but instead, it has imposed American values and culture and a way of life on everyone everywhere^{xx}. Thomas Friedman has observed that globalization has its own dominant culture, which is why it tends to be homogenizing. Niall Ferguson has indicated that globalization is a fancy word for imperialism, imposing values and institutions on others.

Instead of conclusions

Many challenges remain, especially in the worst areas like that of health. This sector has been difficult to achieve. It is still not “for all” but rather characterized by glaring inequities among socio-economic groups and classes. Similarly, from the above, the adverse impact of climate change poses a further threat to the issue of sustainability and to the achievement of the MDGs. This also presents a significant policy challenge for a continent that faces huge energy needs to power its development and industrialization. As a result, access to technology and financing become a must. These all call for a genuine partnership with Europe and with other actors; partnership that is not based on colonial history or competition over resources: maybe a plan like that of the Marshall plan for Europe and in a way that is consistent – to the extent possible – with the African way.

ⁱ N.O Mimiko, “Tradition, Governance, Challenges and the Prospects of Change in Africa” in Niyi Afolabi, ed. *Toyin Falola: The Man, The Mask, The Muse*. North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), pp.641-642.

ⁱⁱ K. Kasongo, “Impact of Globalization on Traditional African Religion and Cultural Conflict”, *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*. Vol.2. N01, 2010), pp. 309.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} T. Standage, *The history of the world in six glasses*, (USA, Walker & Co, 2005).

^v D. Arowolo, *The effects of western civilization on Africa*, (*Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.1.No 1, 2010), p.7.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} See N.O Mimiko, “Tradition, Governance, Challenges and the Prospects of Change in Africa” in Niyi Afolabi, ed. *Toyin Falola: The Man, The Mask, And The Muse*, op. cit., p.640.

^{viii} W. Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, (London, Boyle- L’Ouverture Publications, 1983).

^{ix} R. A. Alkali, *International Relations and Nigeria’s Foreign Policy*, (Kaduna, North Point Publishers, 2003).

^x T. Obadina, *The Myth of Neo-Colonialism*, (*Africa Economic analysis*, 2000), p.1.

^{xi} D. Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa*, (London, Penguin Group, 2009), p.67.

^{xii} Peter Bauer was a Hungarian-born economist from LSE.

^{xiii} R. Calderesi, *The trouble with Africa, why foreign aid isn’t working*, (USA, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.163.

^{xiv} Ibid, p.164.

^{xv} UNCTAD, *Economic Development in Africa: Rethinking the Role of Foreign Direct Investment*, (Geneva: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2005).

^{xvi} H. Gorg and D Greenaway, *On whether domestic firms benefit from foreign direct investment*, (The World Bank Research Observer, 19(2), 2004), pp. 171.

^{xvii} See S. Ajayi, *The Challenges of Financing Development in Africa*. UNECA Discussion Paper Series ESPD/DPS/99/2., (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1999); See also, S. Ajayi, "What Africa needs to do to benefit from globalization"? *Finance and Development journal* Vol, 38(4), 2000), pp.6–8, and S.Ajayi, *Globalization and Africa*", (*Journal of African Economies*, 12(Supp. 1), 2000), pp.120–50.

^{xviii} MDG Report, *Assessing progress in Africa towards the Millennium Development Goals*, 2010).

^{xix} A. Watson, *Diplomacy, the Dialogue between States*, (London, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982), p.161.

^{xx} P. Chandra, *Theories of International Relations*, (India, Vikas Publishing House Pty.Ltd), p.301.