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The Development Discussion

Africa has received the most financial development aid over the decades, but has made the least progress. As Mabe (2004) points out, the situation will most likely be exacerbated by globalization, as most African countries have difficulties keeping up with the changes.

During the Cold War, generous financial aid was given to African countries for the sole purpose of keeping them from bonding with the enemy. This changed when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and conditions started to be made for payments – like good governance. Only then did the difficulties that resulted from foreign aid become apparent, but few experts realized that African political systems and cultures themselves were the most important hindrances to their own development.

During the oil boom, Africa was full of optimism. Governments took up loans that were supposed to develop the country, but these were invested badly and subsequently could not be paid back. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund introduced Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s. Their successes were meager, not least because of the resistance of the African governments. In the meantime, investors have lost interest in Africa, which is stagnating economically. The continent has become a “virtual nonentity in world trade“ (Ake 1996: 115).

One of the Nigerian political scientist Ake’s central arguments is that development has in fact not failed, but has never actually been launched. The leaders of the newly independent African countries were so preoccupied with remaining in power that they never got around to development programs. After the colonists had been chased away, most of the newly independent countries became caught up in brutal fights among the elites, which most often ran along ethnic lines. Usually unasked, the former colonialists, from whom African governments expected protection, found themselves in the arbiter role in these fights. The political agenda was handed over to them, along with the development agenda, which was increasingly alienated from the real needs of African countries and their peoples.

Western countries gradually gained a consciousness of their colonial wrongdoings and felt it was now their duty to help their former colonies. They perceived state structures (rightly) as corrupt and slow, so parallel structures were used to channel help to the needy. While the intention to help is noteworthy, it has oftentimes been overlooked that a budding democracy is weakened by the use of such parallel structures, while at the same time the belief has been reinforced that the West is responsible for Africa’s development.

Exterior causes of failed development

Most development projects are conceived of outside the context for which they are meant, for example in Germany, the USA, Japan or China. This is counterproductive for an inner democratization process in the African countries themselves. Ideally, projects should arise from the needs and wants of the people themselves, and not be brought to them from the outside. Development agencies are starting to realize this and “sustainability” has become the keyword. Traditionally, development help has meant rolling in with a truck, equipment and engineers, digging a well and installing a pump, and then leaving for the next arid and needy village. It has become apparent that the well alone is not enough to develop a village, for the pump is not looked after and will fall to ruins, not to mention other harmful behavior with regard to HIV-AIDS contraception. Help is only sustainable if it comes out of and builds on the indigenous context.

For Ake (1996), democratization is the biggest challenge to Africa’s future, which cannot commence while development comes from the outside.

When a people must be developed not by themselves but by others, development becomes a benevolence that is largely insensitive to social needs (118).

The development discourse usually sees all responsibility as being on the side of the former colonialist countries. I would like to introduce another point of view here and point out the responsibility of Africa itself for its failed development.

Development problems from within

The Cameroonian author Axelle Kabou (1993) challenges Africans to look at themselves and demands that they face the logic of submission, without which Europe could not have gained so much power over them in the first place. She postulates that deep in the African psyche there is a tendency to be passive and wait for good things to happen or simply accept it if they do not. From Kabou’s point of view, Africa is in fact rejecting progress (29).

Even if donor countries annulled all its debts, Africa’s problems would not be solved, for the debts are merely symptoms of the underlying, intrinsic problems.

Africa’s view of the world is comparable to Europe’s in the Middle Ages:

Psychologically speaking, Africa is living in the Middle Ages – an observation that has become banal. [...] Transparency, consequentiality and logical thinking are [...] abhorred (116, translation by S.G.).

No matter how shocked outsiders may be at the facts and news coming from that continent, the situation has so far not triggered a paradigm shift within Africa itself. Africans are very

flexible and willing to integrate new elements into their lives, but their underlying worldview is still maintained.

An example: The Gbaya of the Central African Republic

The Gbaya live in the border region between Cameroon and the Central African Republic. The CAR was a French colony (then called Oubangui-Chari), except from 1910 to 1914, when the Germans controlled the territory. French is still the official language, but the African lingua franca, Sango, which is not associated with any particular ethnic group, is widely used. The population of the CAR is widely dispersed, and there are only 6.1 inhabitants per square kilometer. Of the 3.8 million Central Africans, 1.25 million are Gbaya.

Decentralism and residential group mobility

One of the main characteristics of the Gbaya is their need for independence and their rejection of leaders or hierarchy. The most visible proof of this is how often they move house, even though they are not nomads. If there is ongoing strife between people in a particular location or frequent sickness and death, they will take up their belongings, find a spot further away in the bush and build a new house there instead of trying to resolve conflicts openly. This is their traditional mode of conflict resolution.



An abandoned house

This is important for the development discussion because developers must be aware that these people do not easily accept authority. Old men are respected, but they do not have any real power over others. In the following picture, the old man on the right was brought the best chair to sit on, while other guests sat on stools or on the floor.



During colonization, the Gbaya suffered the effects of exploitation less than other peoples because instead of doing as they were told they simply dispersed into the bush. Since the biggest social entity is the family, mobility is not a problem.

If anyone is to convince the Gbaya of anything, it must be done individually.

Time focus and planning horizon

The Gbaya are polychronic and their attention is fixed firmly on the present. Generally speaking, they do not plan the future. Money is immediately spent on “urgent” but not always important things. Instead of keeping buildings or material in good shape, they are simply used. This makes it extremely hard for an individual to prosper economically, and it is even less likely that the whole group will rise up and become a meaningful economic entity.

A solid education would offer Gbaya children a wider horizon and possibilities that their parents did not have, but this perspective is Western and oriented toward the future. In the present, family and community duties are much more urgent: fetching water, tending fields, cooking, marrying early and having the maximum number of children.

Here is an example to illustrate the way that the Gbaya handle time. I asked a young man how old his wife was, and he said “16”. But when I met her, she told me that she was 19 or 20. She had been 16 when they married, which was four years ago, and the young man seems to have remained trapped in that moment (although there is also an educational dimension to this, leaving the young man’s mathematical capabilities open to question).

The focus on the present (and corresponding lack of focus on the future) is one of the reasons why this culture is having such difficulties in adjusting to the world’s demands.

For the Gbaya, social contacts always have priority over activities. One could even say that the world from a Gbaya's point of view is a network of social ties. This is one of the main obstacles to development, since the demands made on the individual by his family and neighbors are omnipresent and have first priority. A Gbaya family extends to 60 or even 100 persons. If one of these family members is ill, those members of the family with money will be expected to help. This may seem like a social paradise to us lonely individualists in Western Europe, but who here would dream of taking in the children of a cousin or a brother who is out of work? If a Gbaya earns any amount of money, members of the extended family will be waiting on his doorstep when he comes home from work, holding out their hands. For the individual with the job, life becomes a trap of work, as relatives help themselves without restriction to the fruits of his labors. It is impossible for him to develop himself and his own nuclear family of wife and children.

Egalitarianism

As happens in many African societies, the Gbaya try to keep everyone on the same level, even if this means pulling people down. This has been described as *negative competition*.

Negative competition consists of a preoccupation with others, with what they have, and what they consume, not out of a concern to see them progress but rather out of a concern that existing relationships should not change. [...] So every person who digresses from the average in any way [...] is the object of intense battles, visible or invisible, real or mystical, in order to bring them [...] back to the level of the group or, at the worst, to neutralize them. So there is a social leveling, which is explicitly wanted and actively practiced (Diallo 1996: 16, translation by S.G.).

Egalitarianism is a kind of individualism, in which everyone insists only on his rights, but not on his responsibilities. Complete individual freedom is perceived as an ideal. This trait of the Gbaya fits in well with their striving for independence and their rejection of leaders. To demonstrate these characteristics, let me give an example. A committee was formed to supervise the building of a (much needed) new town hall. The first thing the committee decided to do was that each of them would take a loan out of the allotted money. Time went by and no one paid back their loan. The work on the building stalled, and then finally came to a standstill. Since every member of the committee had taken a loan, no one was in a position to demand of the others that they pay back their amount. They had maneuvered themselves into a dead end, and the grass grew tall between the half-built, knee-high walls.

A witchcraft worldview

In the European Middle Ages, people believed that certain individuals possessed powers which could control the forces of nature. The Age of Enlightenment put an end to this view, and nature was no longer seen as frightening and threatening, but as something to be made

generally serviceable to man. The Gbaya, on the other hand, believe even today that nature is a mighty and inexplicable force that can be manipulated by witchcraft. They use witchcraft to explain traumatic events, such as the death of a loved one. But what is more troublesome is that it is used as a mechanism of social control:

Witchcraft is a social and cultural manifestation that reveals the capacity of individuals to be subjected to and resist an established normative order [...] (Bond & Ciekawy 2001: 317).

The Gbaya try to maintain good relationships with others, so that they will not be accused of witchcraft if something bad occurs. The consequence is that, ultimately, development is depressed and conflicts are not resolved in an open, constructive way.

In the witchcraft of the Gbaya, there are three protagonists: the witch (or sorcerer), the accusers, and the diviner.

Roser (2000) examines real cases of witchcraft and analyses the complex social functions that it fulfills. After a death, the grieving family will unfailingly search for the person “who did it”, no matter how the person had died. Suspicion usually focuses on individuals who are on the outskirts of society. To make sure, a professional diviner will be summoned. The judicial system perceives him as help, and he himself sees himself as a help to justice and even to the church. He will make out the sorcerer or sorceress, who is usually the person whom the village had been suspecting anyway. The accused, perhaps totally unaware of the supposed deed, finds himself or herself in a helpless situation, since the fact of accusation by the diviner is considered proof enough. The unfortunate person accused usually believes in his or her guilt and will admit it, especially to avoid torture.

The consequences of this whole mechanism for development are appalling:

It cannot be stressed enough how much the belief in the magic powers of witchcraft has hindered the social development of Africa, and continues to do so.
[...] The more diplomas someone in Africa has, the more he will believe he is the target of jealousy and magic, and the more he will make use of talismans to protect himself (Kabou 1993: 212, translation by S.G.)

Anyone who is successful in Africa makes himself suspicious to others, for in their eyes he must have attained his success by witchcraft. But he also suspects others of wanting to topple him from his place of power, for he feels the jealousy.

The psychological effects are substantial:

Victims can experience a range of difficulties and disorders produced by fear, anxiety, and stress, in addition to confinement, segregation, and social stigmas. They can be afflicted by social as well as physical death (Bond & Ciekawy 2001: 324).

For Bond and Ciekawy, the “victim” is the accused sorcerer, but from the *African* point of view the victim is the dead or hurt person; the sorcerer, on the other hand, is a dangerous criminal. It was common practice during the slave trade for African peoples to sell the alleged sorcerers to the slave traders first.

In dialogue with Africans it is practically impossible to approach this subject from a modern, Western point of view, because the witchcraft system is extremely flexible, and also deeply ingrained in African thinking. Kuhn writes about paradigm shifts:

By themselves they cannot and will not falsify that philosophical theory, for its defenders will [...] devise numerous articulations and *ad hoc* modifications of their theory in order to eliminate any apparent conflict (Kuhn 1970: 78).

A young woman told me of stomach pains that she had been having for several months. She believed a neighboring woman had wished them upon her because her husband had refused to give the old lady money. When I pointed out that the episode between the old woman and her husband had been *after* her pains had started, she responded calmly that, yes, that was so, but that it was then that the pains had got really bad.

Mission hospitals and Western medicine do not present a threat to the witchcraft system, because they are seen not as a fundamentally different system, but as merely a different kind of magic. Otherwise, it would probably not have been so easy to introduce hospitals in Africa – if they had been viewed as a challenge to the Africans’ worldview, there would have been more opposition.

Development perspectives

Development is the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realize higher levels of civilization in accordance with their own choices and values (Ake 1996: 125).

Development only happens when people decide and own their destiny. This could become possible if development aid payments were stopped. Kabou is one of the most vehement proponents of this daring and innovative idea and believes that Africans in particular would be forced to rethink and ultimately be enabled to take responsibility. Dictatorships would crumble because they could no longer appropriate the funds paid by rich Western governments. Africans seem to be the only people in the world who believe that others are responsible for their development. They should wake up and realize that no one really cares anymore if they do not develop themselves (Kabou 1993: 94).

It is difficult to resist posing the dangerous question: How is it that the Africans came to be colonized in the first place? Kabou believes that there is a psychology of deference inherent

in most Africans that made it possible for Europeans to exploit them. The reality is that all peoples are responsible for their own future, and Africans must finally take ownership of theirs.

Intellect, technical knowledge, business administration and organization are prerequisites, without which development will simply not happen (Kabou 1993: 155). Grade school education must have the highest priority for African governments and it must be a basic right. Only then can negative competition be changed into a consciousness that involves the well-being of the whole country. Higher education on the other hand should not be a basic right but allocated only according to merit (Diallo 1996: 85). Population growth must be slowed down. It is generally known that it is easier to raise the standard of life for a family with two children than it is for a family with eleven (67).

Finally, the inhabitants of the rich donor countries must rethink what they are doing. They must learn to see the *reality* of Africa, not some version of Africa as they would like it to be. Axelle Kabou gives the Third-World-Sympathizers an ultimatum – that they should stop seeing Africans as innocent saints, and stop projecting their own romantic wishes onto Africa and its inhabitants (16).

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