

GOVERNING THE AFRICAN POLITICAL
SPACE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
A REFLECTION ON NEPAD

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Introduction

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) has been hailed as perhaps the boldest new initiative in recent times on the appropriate path which the African continent should be taking towards its long-term development. Coming as it does within the context of the barely disguised admission of the failure of some twenty years of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment and the donor regime of conditionality/cross-conditionality that was integral to the promotion of the neo-liberal agenda on the continent, it appears to offer a new basis for some hope that Africa may yet be able to rediscover the path to sustainable development. This is all the more so as the NEPAD programme is presented not only as an African initiative in origin but also an African-driven project in content and direction, an apparent departure from the experience of the adjustment years which is, therefore, for the very reason of its alleged African "ownership", expected to strengthen the prospects for the achievement of the goals of the initiative. And yet, unlike the Lagos Plan of Action of 1980 which, as an African initiative too, stood in almost complete contrast to the Berg Report of 1981 and the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programme that was built on it, the NEPAD document reflects many of the assumptions that underpinned the neo-liberal economic, social and political reform agenda for Africa during the 1980s and 1990s. The coincidence of diagnosis and prescription between the NEPAD and the assumptions of neo-liberalism also sets it aside from the Lagos Plan of Action which, in economic content and direction, was clearly more structuralist and Keynesian. But perhaps more importantly, the coincidence between the NEPAD and the central tenets of neo-liberalism raises the question of the extent to which the initiative can serve as the foundation for a new optimism about Africa's future and this is an issue that cannot be treated lightly given the highly limited record of the orthodox structural adjustment framework.

Although defined as an Africa-owned programme, the NEPAD is not without its own self-prescribed “conditionalities”. Described as “initiatives” in the various NEPAD documents, they are considered as prerequisites both for the successful implementation of the goals of the programme and for the long-term sustainability of the development process in Africa. And unlike the conditionality of the IMF and the World Bank, these prerequisites for the success of the NEPAD are presented – in spite of their uncanny resemblance to the “political conditionalities” and governance reforms which Western donors devised following the end of the Cold War - as self-identified and self-imposed by African leaders who, by the same token, commit themselves, their countries and peoples to the strict observation of the conditions both individually and jointly. Within the logic of the NEPAD, African adherence to the pre-requisites for the successful implementation of the programme is expected to be rewarded with material support from the developed countries and international financial institutions. This reciprocal logic whereby self-subscription/self-adherence to “best” international practices is traded for international financial support is integral to the entire concept of partnership that underpins the NEPAD. Some critics of the principle and/or practice of the externally-imposed conditionality/cross-conditionality clauses of the last two decades have welcomed the self-defined and self-imposed conditions spelt out in the NEPAD as representing a new, more meaningful stage of policy ownership that would improve the prospects for reform sustainability in Africa. This is an issue to which we will return later in this essay.

Four broad areas are covered under the initiatives that are built into the NEPAD and defined as prerequisites for the success of the programme. They are the Peace and Security Initiative; the Democracy and Political Governance Initiative; the Economic Governance Initiative; and the Sub-Regional and Regional Approaches to Development. The Democracy and Political Governance Initiative centres on the place of democracy and “good” political governance in the contemporary African quest for sustainable development. It incorporates a commitment by African leaders to create and consolidate basic processes and practices of governance that are in line with the principles of transparency, respect for human rights, promotion of the rule of law, accountability, and integrity; support initiatives that foster good governance; respect for the global standards of democracy, including political pluralism, multiparty politics, the right of workers to form unions, and fair and open elections organised periodically; work through the leadership of African countries to institutionalise all the commitments that ensure adherence to the political core values enshrined in the NEPAD; respect the basic standards of democratic behaviour; and identify existing institutional weaknesses and mobilise the resources and expertise necessary for redressing them. Sustainable development is considered inconceivable without the emplacement of an appropriate politico-governance frame within which the development project can be undertaken. African leaders,

through the NEPAD document have, therefore, perhaps for the first time, taken an open, collective commitment to promote and abide by the principles of “good” governance, complete with a “peer review” system and a code of conduct. This commitment is seen as being inseparable from other related commitments to promote peace and security, carry out capacity-building and institutional reforms, and improve economic governance.

On the face of things, the ideas and ideals spelt out in the NEPAD document cover a whole host of issues and concerns in a manner that is still very general as to appear to offer as many interests as possible something to hold on to, however small. In this connection, the democracy and political governance component of the document would seem to address many of the concerns that have been at the core of the struggle for the reform of the management of political power, the political space and public life in Africa. In reality, however, the main thrust of the NEPAD ideas and the ideals, as well as the economic governance framework within which they are defined, are lacking in the kind of basic social anchor that can sure that the democracy and governance proposals that are made are moved from the realm of the *pro forma* and technocratic to the arena of the political as a living experience marked by contestations and negotiations among the bearers of competing interests. This paper suggests, therefore, that the democracy and governance initiative of the NEPAD raises more questions than it answers and, on a more critical examination, seems designed more to pander to a donor audience than responding to or representing the concerns of the domestic political forces in the vanguard of the struggle for the reform of the African political space and developmental agenda.

The Roots of Africa’s Contemporary Governance and Political Crises

African countries entered the period after the Second World War on the basis of a gradually intensifying popular mobilisation against continued colonial domination. The sources of the popular discontent against colonial rule were many but, in summary, they included a strong desire to overturn the affront against human liberty and the dignity of the African which colonialism represented; a generalised rejection of the continued, racially-based segregation of opportunities for social advancement and access to resources, amenities and services; the increasingly untenable politico-administrative framework that denied the colonised full, unfettered participation and representation in the structures of governance; and the intensive draining of the resources of the colonies without a corresponding/commensurate investment in the development of their physical and social infrastructure, as well as in their human resources. All of these concerns crystallised into a concrete political agenda and momentum for the

decolonisation of Africa; they were also the critical platforms on which popular support for the anti-colonial struggle was mobilised. Indeed, as has been pointed out by many students of the African anti-colonial movement, the unity between the nationalist politicians who spearheaded the independence struggle and the popular social movements, including mass organisations of workers, peasants, students, and the urban poor, that sustained the struggle was built around these concerns. The promise of independence nationalism lay not only in discarding colonial rule and the broad-ranging exclusion on the basis of which it thrived but also opening up access to economic, social and political opportunities. In other words, the anti-colonial nationalist coalition was held together by the promise of freedom, unity and development. In this sense, the promise was at the core of the post-colonial social contract that linked state and society in the post-independence period.

On the whole, much of the first decade of independence was marked by efforts to give meaning to the social bargain that underpinned the nationalist anti-colonial struggle. Irrespective of whether they declared themselves as being socialist, free market, or mixed-economy in orientation, the independence governments all invested, without exception, in expansion of the social and physical infrastructure of their countries in a manner which widened access to education, modern health facilities, transportation, housing, skills development, and employment on a scale that exceeded what colonialism was able to offer. For this purpose, and again irrespective of the ideological leanings which they professed, all of the independence governments reserved an important role for the state in the development process; so too did they undertake varying degrees of planning designed not only to improve the foundations of the economy but also to continually increase access to opportunities in a context of huge, pent-up demand. They were aided in this regard by the reasonably high levels of economic growth which most countries recorded during the first decade of independence and which, in virtually all countries, was above the rate of population growth. Indeed, when the average growth rates recorded by African countries over the period from the 1960s to the early 1970s are compared with those that were experienced during the structural adjustment years of the 1980s and 1990s, the immediate post-independence years, for all their shortcomings, would seem to have been golden years of some sort in spite of the best efforts of the Berg Report to falsify the history of that period.

To be sure, the effort to give content and meaning to the post-colonial social contract was not without its internal contradictions and limitations. Nowhere were these contradictions more evident than in the realm of the political framework within which the post-colonial development process was undertaken. Initially involving the gradual demobilisation of the social movements whose engagement and activism gave life and momentum to the anti-colonial struggle, the post-independence political framework was eventually to take the form of the

narrowing of the national political space as political pluralism gave way to political monopoly symbolised by the rise of the one-party state and military dictatorship. The immediate context for this constriction of the political space and political participation was defined by the way in which the goal of national unity and integration was handled: the assumption that the objective of uniting the multi-ethnic and, in many cases, multi-religious countries of Africa after decades of colonial strategies of divide and rule was one which could only be constituted from above by the state. This top-down approach to the national unity project soon translated into a monopolisation of the political terrain by the state in a process which was accelerated first by dissolution of the anti-colonial nationalist coalition, then by the slow down of the rate of economic growth and, therefore, of the rate of expansion of opportunities for different categories of people, and, finally, the emergence in the course of the 1970s of a deep-seated crisis in the post-colonial model of accumulation that signalled the beginning of the end of the post-colonial social contract.

A rich literature already exists on the origins and dimensions of the African economic crisis to warrant an exclusion of their detailed discussion here. It is important, however, to underline two points. First, the management of the crisis was accompanied by increased levels of political repression and exclusion which further widened the gulf between state and society, popular social forces and the wielders of state power. Secondly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank structural adjustment framework that triumphed in the quest for reversing the dwindling economic fortunes of Africa not only exacerbated the crisis of decline but also represented the final nail in the coffin of the post-colonial model of accumulation and the social contract that was built into it. In the face of the failure of structural adjustment to redress the crises of decline facing the continent, both increased political repression/authoritarianism and the worsening problems of livelihood combined, in the course of the 1980s, to raise serious questions about the representativeness and legitimacy of the state. The deepening social crisis across the African continent, including reversals in some of the health and educational gains of independence, also generated concerns about citizenship and citizenship rights which, in some instances, translated into concerted challenges to the entire post-independence nation-state project. In the worst cases, the combination of diminished state and governmental legitimacy, increased political authoritarianism, and the erosion of citizenship rights resulted in the efflorescence of competing ethno-regional and religious identities which expressed themselves violently and caused the collapse of central governmental authority.

Integral to the agenda of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment and, therefore, the irretrievable collapse of the post-colonial social contract was the promotion of a narrow, neo-liberal model of the market and its workings. In practice, this model of economic reform, strongly anti-state as it was in ideological orientation, resulted in the incapacitation of the

African state as a socio-political and economic actor. This remained so in spite of the introduction, nearly a decade after structural adjustment first made its entry into the African economic crisis management approach, of a governance programme which was heralded as the framework for reforming the legal-administrative structures and processes of the African state. Defined in terms of the promotion of civil service reforms, the rule of law, transparency, accountability, the free flow of information, and policy predictability, the programme was closely associated with the post-Cold War political conditionality which the leading Western powers introduced into their dealings with African countries and under which the latter were required to carry out domestic political reforms. Beyond the façade of what they promised, both the governance programme of the IMF/World Bank and the political conditionality of the Western powers formed part of the strategic objective of securing the neo-liberal reform agenda in Africa. Indeed, the governance programme of the international financial institutions was presented as the missing link in the structural adjustment chain while the political conditionality of the Western powers was built on the assumption, in part at least, that it could produce a more conducive framework for the pursuit of market reforms. For this reason, both interventions failed to address the roots of the crisis of the governance of the political space and public life that was in evidence in different countries.

The huge social and political costs exacted by prolonged economic crisis and structural adjustment propelled popular agitations for political reforms during the course of the 1990s. These agitations were to result in the end of single party and military rule in most of Africa; they also led to the outright overthrow of the *ancien regime* in several countries. But the full import of the rebirth of politico-electoral pluralism in Africa was severely limited by two factors: the failure, in spite of the investment of effort in constitutionalism and constitutional reform, to overhaul the foundations of the post-colonial state itself and the context of continued neo-liberal economic reform within which the transition from authoritarianism was attempted. The consequence was that power and its exercise were not brought under popular democratic control while what passed for the political reforms that were implemented were soon shown to be lacking in a meaningful socio-economic and ideological content that could constitute an enduring basis both for the reconstruction of the legitimacy of the state, a new vision of the future, and the negotiation of a new social contract. The widespread feeling of powerlessness and choicelessness that pervades the African political landscape in spite of the strong push made by popular forces for the reform and expansion of the political space explains why such commentators as Claude Ake have suggested that the 1990s in Africa were characterised by the democratisation of disempowerment in which people voted without choosing. Clearly then, the Political Question remained a key outstanding issue even as Africa was ushered into the new millennium.

NEPAD and the Challenges of Political and Governance Reform

Few will disagree that the effective management of the Political Question in Africa today is a pre-requisite for the sustainable development of the continent. Indeed, numerous African scholars, among them Claude Ake, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, Mahmood Mamdani, and Abdul Raufu Mustapha, have suggested that the resolution of the Political Question is an important pre-condition for the resolution of the governance and developmental crises of the continent. In this connection, attention has been drawn by Ake to the ways in which, according to him, the manner of conducting politics has tended to underdevelop Africa while Mamdani observes that the bifurcated nature of the state effectively disenfranchises a majority of the populace. Wamba dia Wamba, for his part, has suggested that the mode of organisation of politics on the basis of the activities of professional politicians not only limits the prospects for the harvesting by the populace of democratic potentialities but also reinforces the authoritarianism inherent in the developmental process. Mustapha, in his own writings, insists on the need for a restructuring of the foundations of the state so that consent can be generated and, therefore, legitimacy and development secured. Scholars who have contributed to the expansion of the boundaries of gender research and advocacy in Africa have also pointed to the ways in which the organisation, structuring and exercise of power have abridged the rights of at least half of the African populace from full participation in the political process. Common to all of the reflections on the interface between the Political Question and development is the problematic of the state, the management of power, and the role of citizens/society in the developmental process.

Beyond the link which scholars have made between politics and its role in influencing the developmental process, it can be argued that the essence of the anti-colonial and post-independence political contestations that have wracked the African continent centre around the struggle, at all levels, for a more representative and accountable politico-constitutional order which can serve as the basis for the mobilisation of the populace behind a developmental agenda. Yet, what the democracy initiative of the NEPAD offers is not so much the basis for a new social contract between the state and society, the rulers and those whom they govern but a repackaging, under purported African “ownership”, of the governance programme which the international financial institutions developed within the framework of orthodox structural adjustment. This programme, into which the World Bank in particular invested a considerable amount of resources during the course of the 1990s, was built on assumptions which represent a particular reading of African politics, society and culture and the ways in which they purportedly interact with the economy. When structural adjustment was introduced into the

African economic crisis management framework in the early 1980s, overwhelming emphasis was initially placed on exclusively macro-economic issues, especially the question of getting prices right. However, as the 1980s progressed and criticisms of the initial “pricist” bias of the adjustment programme gathered pace, attention began to be focused on other important variables that might be crucial for the realisation of the market reform agenda which the World Bank was promoting. This became all the more crucial as structural adjustment implementation was accompanied by a lacklustre economic performance. It was in this context that the governance programme of the Bank was developed as a necessary component for the successful implementation of structural adjustment.

The central problematic which the World Bank’s governance programme was designed to overcome was the observed policy implementation “slippage” exhibited by African governments in the process of adjustment implementation. Reflected, among other things, in the “stop-go-stop” approach to reform allegedly adopted by African countries, a glaring deficit of political will to initiate and sustain tough but necessary austerity, and the failure to build up a domestic constituency for the economic reform agenda, “slippage” was also attributed to the disproportionate influence exercised by powerful and well-connected vested interests with a stake in halting the market reforms of the adjusting governments. The key challenge that was defined consisted, therefore, of overcoming the problems that militated against successful adjustment implementation, problems which, in the final analysis, were said to be reflective of the essentially (neo-)patrimonial character of the state and/or society in Africa. In this reading of African politics, society and culture, corruption, cronyism, nepotism, patron-clientelism, rent-seeking and a lack of openness in the procurement of goods and services were central to the onset of the African economic crisis; they were also interpreted as constituting obstacles to the successful implementation of market reforms. A governance programme, together with a conscious effort to build up an independent technocratic elite, became a key preoccupation of the World Bank in its bid to secure structural adjustment. Indicators of “good governance” – which we spelt out earlier in this essay - were introduced and employed in assessing African countries; indeed, “good governance” became part and parcel of the conditionality/cross-conditionality clauses of the World Bank, the IMF and other donors. It was this governance programme that was carried over hook, line and sinker into the NEPAD document; the only difference is that this time, the programme has been packaged under purported African ownership.

Much has been made of the fact that the NEPAD is an Africa-owned document in all of the material details connected to its design and implementation. However, the real meaning and significance of local policy ownership rests less in its geographical origin and more in its local anchorage. In this connection, there is a need to pay attention to the policy process itself and the

ways in which through contestation and negotiation, all concerned and interested social actors/actresses are able to relate to the policy choices that are made as broadly corresponding to their aspirations. Such broad association with policy choices that reflect a consensus among competing interests is crucial to the appropriation of policy by different groups both for the collective good and their own specific strategic interests. In other words, ownership, if it is to be really meaningful, should be organically linked to the generation and sustenance of consent – and, ultimately, legitimacy. No public policy can be considered as legitimate only because it is described as being owned by Africa and Africans. It follows that ownership cannot be the exclusive monopoly of the elite; it must necessarily have popular anchorage. In addition, it should have a strong degree of local value added that is linked to local specificities and circumstances and not just be seen as a *pro forma* proclamation that is important in and of itself. The political democracy and governance initiative of the NEPAD does not offer any such local value added or anchorage in domestic political processes/structures. Indeed, even the entire process leading to the production of the NEPAD has been bereft of systematic public debate and consultation within Africa, a serious deficit which is not mitigated by the strategy of also making the initiative an almost exclusively governmental affair. It is little wonder that many have challenged the top-down approach that has underpinned the introduction of the NEPAD and the approach that will be taken towards the realisation of its goals.

The purported African ownership of the NEPAD has also been presented as part of the self-commitment of African leaders to “universal” democratic practice. But democracy comes in many shapes and forms, adapted as it is to the specific historical context in which it has triumphed. The authors of the NEPAD seem to assume that there is a universal, ideal type model of democracy and governance against which African and other experiences can be measured. What is more, it is assumed that this universal model can be abstracted from the current practices of the West, as though those practices themselves are not problematic and diverse. The consequence is that the kinds of creativity and originality that could have been brought to bear on the quest for a political framework that is at once liberating and empowering of the peoples of Africa are not explored. Instead emphasis is placed in the NEPAD document on “good” governance as opposed to democratic governance. And yet, the content of the governance framework which is espoused, borrowed as it is from the World Bank, seems too functionalist, managerial and technocratic. It is a framework whose origins consisted of an effort to subordinate politics to the dictates of neo-liberal economic policies and, in so doing, facilitate the demobilisation of political actors/actresses in the face of market orthodoxy. But, sustainable African development, if it is to be realised, must proceed from a premise which treats politics as a legitimate arena that is integral to the developmental process and development itself as an equally legitimate terrain of politics. Viewed in this way, it becomes

evident that the key issues in the creation of a political-governance framework for the development process consist not only of the promotion of a social bargain that links all key political actors to another and the state but also guarantees popular participation in the political and policy processes.

Linked back to the question of ownership, it becomes clear that the latter is not something which is adopted simply because it is fashionable and politically correct in donor circles but, rather, becomes a live political process, the product of contestations, bargaining and compromises which, once adopted, makes it easier for policy to be sustained and the populace to be mobilised behind the national, sub-regional and/or regional development project. Accountability ceases to be a technocratic question and is, instead, integral to the politics of participation and democracy. Nor is it accountability simply a voluntaristic affair, to be left to the good intentions of leaders who proclaim their determination and commitment to adhere, henceforth, to “good” governance. Instead, it becomes part of the structural imperatives of the political order, with clearly identifiable actors/actresses working within processes and structures that, in combination, serve as its guarantor within the public arena and at all levels of public life. For this reason, the proposal of that African leaders would introduce a peer review system which might be backed by a code of conduct, while enticing, can not really address the fundamental questions of political accountability. The basic questions which have been asked by critics such as who is to call who to account, how, why and for what, and the issue of who determines the criteria for the peer review system only underscore the point that a voluntaristic approach to accountability in the exercise of power and public office will not do. In any case, a peer-based approach is not, by definition, one which necessarily assures the integrity of the review process; all such review systems are subject to bias, abuse, problems of interpretation, and in the case of political leaders, strategic choices tied to definitions of the national interest. Zimbabwe is a live example of the difficulties and dilemmas that are posed.

In the end, therefore, the peer review proposal might not only fail to live up to its promise but may, in fact, become the route by which some of the conditionalities of the adjustment years are locked into the fabric of the African economy and politics. More than this, the manner of formulation of the principle of reciprocity between Africa and the developed countries that underpins the NEPAD conceptualisation and operationalisation of partnership makes it conceivable that the NEPAD itself could become a new source of conditionality in the relations between the donor community and the continent. A hint of this was gained in the run-up to the Zimbabwean elections when the leading Western countries put pressure on African governments to take action against the Mugabe regime or support sanctions against it as an acid test of the NEPAD commitments that they were making. The British Prime Minister was probably the most direct in establishing this linkage but he was not alone and although his

tactics of seeking African support for the isolation of Mugabe failed, it pointed to the danger that in the interaction between Africa and the leading donor countries, the NEPAD and its political and governance section might well become an additional element in the diplomacy of conditionality with which the donors have grown accustomed to dealing with Africa. The notion of partnership does not preclude the continued pursuit by donor countries of their foreign policy and geo-political objectives and the terms of the reciprocity between Africa and the West as spelt out in the NEPAD offers ample room for this to happen. It also provides a basis for the exercise of selectivity by the donors in the allocation of whatever resources are made available to support the NEPAD.

Concluding Remarks

That African is need of a political and governance framework that is both democratic and conducive to the task of development is not in debate. The approach taken to addressing this need in the NEPAD document does not, however, seem to promise a viable path towards the desired framework. It has been suggested in this essay that such a framework might be difficult to evolve in the absence of a new social bargain that helps individuals and groups to make sense of their membership of the political community to which they belong. Such a bargain also has implications for the state form, the vision of development, and the responsibilities and duties of citizenship. Scholars such as Thandika Mkandawire have suggested, rightly in my view, that what all of these call for is the rebirth of an African developmental state which is also by definition democratic and whose economic foundations are built on policy heterodoxy.