

# UNITY OR POVERTY: THE DILEMMAS OF PROGRESS IN AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

*By P. Anyang' Nyong'o; Fellow; African Academy of Sciences; Nairobi, Kenya*

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*pan@africaonline.co.ke*



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As Africa enters the twenty first century, her people are faced with basic problems of survival that they expected to have been overcome after almost half a century of political independence. At independence, almost every African country declared war against three enemies: poverty, ignorance and disease. Today we are poorer than we were 40 years ago. The majority of our people has no access to modern knowledge and can neither read nor write. Diseases that had been eradicated from the face of the earth after the advancement of science in the post-war period are currently ravaging us as if we are not part and parcel of the modern world. New diseases like HIV/AIDS have found a home in Africa, capitalizing on our ignorance and exploiting our poverty to “promote millions of our people to higher glory”—as the papers put it in their death announcements—at a time when the demands of our economy most need them.

To add insult to injury, we have—presiding over us—governments that are not very gifted in identifying and serving our most pressing national and continental needs. When they do, they are rarely in a hurry to implement those policies that will help eradicate poverty, provide knowledge and give our people universal access to healthy living. Healthy living does not simply mean keeping away from diseases, but eating well, having proper shelter and clothing, and being secure from the ravages of nature and the evil intentions of wicked people. In other words, our people want what Ogot and Welborn once called “a place to feel at home.”

That place to feel at home is what has been eluding our governments, leaders and political entrepreneurs as if it was not the mission of independence. To retain political power that is “won” illegitimately, to keep away from public hearing those who are opposed to the misdeeds of the rulers, the African ruling classes specialized in political repression and the settling of political disagreements in violent and destructive ways. All this has adversely affected possibilities and opportunities for development in Africa. Wars, internal conflicts, internally displaced persons, people imprisoned without trials, coups d'etat, lack of respect for the sanctity of human life: all these have been the enemies of progress in Africa. As Okot p'Bitek put it very poignantly in his epic poem, *Song of Lawino*:

*“And while the pythons of sickness  
Swallow the children  
And the buffalos of poverty  
Knock the people down  
And ignorance stands there  
Like an elephant,  
The war leaders  
Are tightly locked in bloody feuds,  
Eating each other’s liver..”*

The “bloody feuds” do not only include the conflicts where guns are drawn and territories fought over. They also include the blood-letting fights for political power using ethnic, religious and territorial chauvinism to divide people in order to rule them, with no agenda for positive and constructive social transformation, but with the single aim of being in power at all costs to the African people.

Kwame Nkrumah had warned the continent soon after his own country, Ghana, achieved independence in 1957: the third to do so after the Second World War. Nkrumah observed that without a serious commitment to a people-centered development process that he believed was socialism, and without political unity at the continental level, neo-colonialism would continue to balkanize and under-develop Africa, and poverty would be perpetuated. Reginald Green and Anne Seidman, two economists who taught at the University of Dar es Salaam in the sixties, confirmed Nkrumah’s thesis in a book that was highly celebrated by Pan-Africanists, and was appropriately titled *Unity or Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Pan-Africanism*.

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere thought Nkrumah was too ambitious, and African unity—good as it was—could only be realized gradually through first putting up regional economic units that could eventually be pieced together into a continental union. Nkrumah was wary of this argument, and observed that leaders would continue to enjoy being big fish in small ponds, and even the regional units might never give way to political federation at the regional level. For Nkrumah good politics needed to be in command, otherwise even economic rationality could easily collapse at the feet of political idiocy. If the history of the first East African Community is anything to go by, Nkrumah was soon proved right in Julius Nyerere’s own backyard.

Why did we not heed the warnings of Nkrumah? Why did we read Green and Seidman and ignore them, or didn't we read them at all? Why did our governments, all these years fail to win the confidence of the people and went ahead to ignore their basic needs?

Forty years after independence, we are back to square one: we are still poor—even poorer—and we are still looking for unity to salvage us from poverty. Now we do not have as many visionary and Pan-Africanist leaders as we had at independence, yet Pan-Africanism seems to have come back once more as the only viable continental ideology for saving Africa from sinking further into the dungeon of political, social and economic decay.

On the one hand is the effort to create an African Union by the *Constitutive Act of Union* that been agreed to by the heads of states and governments, and is to be fully formalized in Pretoria in July 2002. We have even gone further and produced the *Protocol establishing the Pan-African Parliament*, a legislative body that is to be the law-making wing of the Union in years to come. On the other hand is the NEPAD that is apparently viewed as Africa's *Marshall Plan*, a proposal to inject massive financial resources into Africa's development while reforming it politically and economically to be accommodated into the global world market not as a dependent but as a partner. Whether these two proposals are viable is the subject matter of this Forum.

As Dani Nabudere notes in his contribution to this Forum, even the proposals for the Union may not lead us to continental political unity. If anything, there is no qualitative difference between the Union and the present OAU, and this will, no doubt, complicate the implementation of the NEPAD proposals. For NEPAD to be viable it needs to be seen as a *policy engine* of the political entity that is the African Union, and any inkling of antagonism or contradiction between the two initiatives would spell the death knell of the effort to leap frog Africa from underdevelopment into modernity and prosperity as NEPAD hopes to do.

The Kenyan human rights lawyer, Shadrack Gutto, warn us against the record of African states in keeping to the international agreements to which they are signatory, let alone honoring the agreements and protocols that they themselves make in the spirit of regional cooperation and Pan-Africanism. Nor have the so-called partners kept their words when they make promises to double or triple ODA to Africa and open their markets to African goods. The G8, in spite of a warm welcome to NEPAD, has already indicated that NEPAD will be used to target aid only to a short-list of "winners" in Africa. In other words, those who satisfy certain political and economic conditions will receive more aid, and not necessarily the most needy,

and not necessarily in accordance with a plan drawn within the framework of the African Union.

The West has not granted Africa “Market Access”, as both Theresa Moyo and Yash Tandon will tell us in this forum, with or without WTO rules. Lual Deng shows how Africa’s agricultural exports meet with tariff walls in attempts to penetrate the EU markets. It must be noted further that pressures to maximize foreign exchange earnings from exports—particularly mineral exports—leave African governments highly vulnerable to the unequal power of large resource transnational companies that maximize their own advantage at the expense of capital accumulation in the Third World. The recent saga in Kenya with the exploitation of tiamin at the Kenyan coast by a Canadian company is a good example. Tanzania is currently undergoing a mineral export boom: but to what advantage to the Tanzanian and the East African Community economy? If Africa is to develop through trade, then intra-African trade must be given a priority; the development of a viable African home market needs to receive the attention it deserves.

Professor Adebayo Adedeji—our keynote speaker--was at the center of numerous initiatives to kick-start Africa’s economic growth and to fight poverty as the UN Under-Secretary General and the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa. These initiatives included, among other things, attempts to create regional home markets through regional economic integration units. A continental *Marshall Plan*, crafted in *The Lagos Plan of Action* and *The Final Act of Lagos* were perhaps one of the most celebrated causes that Adedeji fought while he was at the helm of the ECA. But when this went largely ignored by the African governments as well as their donor “partners”, Adedeji and his team brought out proposals to counteract the World Bank led Structural Adjustment Programs in Africa in line with the critics that African academics had levied against these SAPs.

These proposals were contained in *The African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Program for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation (AAF-SAP)* of 1989 and the *African Charter for Popular Participation for Development* of 1990. If these initiatives provided viable alternatives for Africa’s development, then the fact that they were easily swept aside—as Archie Mafeje tells us—is indicative of an enduring weakness in ex-colonial Africa. This weakness is perhaps to be found in what Archie calls a pervasive failure to break the umbilical cord with colonialism. This is a warning that both Frantz Fanon (*Wretched of the Earth*) and Rene Dumont (*False Start in Africa*) had given us in the sixties.

Today we are fortunate to have Professor Adedeji to tell us what actually happened subsequently, and what aspects of these proposals can still be seen in NEPAD. Is NEPAD an improvement on, a diversion from, or an aberration to these earlier initiatives?

The World Bank's latest version of its own economic recovery plan for Africa is contained in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) that have replaced the Policy Framework Papers (PFPs). What is the difference? Why the change? Is it simply a change in style, or is it a change in substance as well? Is NEPAD now going to be the more legitimate "home grown" version of PRSPs, and to what extent is this in the interest of Africa's need to leap frog into modernity? It is interesting to note that African governments have subjected PRSPs to very extensive discussions among the people, appealing to civil society to make inputs into policy-making so as to ensure the success of the PRSPs. They do not seem to have given NEPAD much attention even within the governments' own bureaucracies.

The New Partnership for African Development is a product of the initiative taken by four African Presidents: General Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Thabo Mbeki of the Republic of South Africa, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal and Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria. It reflects the view that the continent's leadership needs to take an accommodative approach to world politics, and to adjust to the realities of neo-liberal globalization that seems to have become triumphant after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late nineteen eighties. It also acknowledges that this process of accommodation must involve internal political and economic reforms that will be in line with liberal democracy and neo-liberal economics.

In other words, it concurs with Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History and the Last Man*) when he states that, as mankind approached the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: *liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty*. For Africa to make it into the twenty first century, it must be part and parcel of this universalism, otherwise called neo-liberal globalization.

The dilemma in Africa is that it has not been liberal, and even the proponents of NEPAD and their ardent followers may not be culturally liberal. Individual freedoms have been severely curtailed by the state, and the market has not been free to grow because of a hostile political and cultural environment in which the state plays a mischievous role. Access to external markets so as to earn the revenue needed to support growth of the home market has been confined to lowly priced raw materials as exports. Little has been made of comparative advantages, even where they exist in this very difficult international environment. Technology,

manufactured goods and technical know-how have, however, been imported at prices way above those earned from exports, creating a situation of tremendous unequal exchange between Africa and the world market, indebtedness and *structural underdevelopment*.

Taking this historical backdrop into account, NEPAD now seeks to offer a recipe for a quantum leap from underdevelopment to capitalist prosperity in which there is a *partnership between two key players*:

- A competent liberal democratic state in Africa, and
- A friendly and “capital providing” world market in which donors and investors will have vested interests in creating wealth in Africa.

Where is this competent and liberal democratic state going to come from in Africa? The best we may hope for within the NEPAD crowd is some form of *benevolent leadership* arising out of the presidential authoritarian regimes that now claim to be democracies all over the continent. Authoritarianism succeeded in bringing about rapid social and economic transformation in places like Singapore because of certain elements in their ruling class which are entirely missing in the African presidential authoritarian regimes. It is not the so-called “Asian values” that many have spoken of: Victor Mallet, in his book, *The Trouble with the Tigers*, has finally put to rest the myth of the Asian values thesis.

Lee Kuan Yew gives a much more convincing explanation of why and how Singaporean authoritarian rule laid the necessary political and cultural framework for rapid social and economic transformation in that country. Without the enlightened leadership of Lee Kuan Yew himself, and the team of committed and honest people he mobilized and put in charge of state power, the Singaporean leap from the Third to the First World would not have been possible other factors notwithstanding.

To quote him, “ our greatest asset was the trust and confidence of the people... We were careful not to squander this newly gained trust by misgoverning and corruption. We needed this political strength to maximize what we could make of our few assets, a natural world class harbor sited in a strategic location astride one of the busiest sea-lanes of the world... The other valuable asset we had was our people: hardworking, thrifty, eager to learn. Although divided into several races, we believed a fair and even-handed policy would get them to live peacefully together, especially if such hardships as unemployment were shared equally and not carried mainly by the minority groups... Singapore had no natural resources for MNCs to exploit. All it had were hard-working people, good basic infrastructure, **and a government that was determined to be honest and competent.**”

Lee Kuan Yew and his comrades made that decision soon after independence in the early sixties. They have never looked back since: the rest of what happened in Singapore is now history. From a per capita income of \$350 at independence they now have a per capita income of \$9,500, the third highest in the world. And this they did without much foreign aid, but with hard-nosed good management of their society, fairness tinged with political ruthlessness and authoritarianism that paid economic dividends. The trouble with Africa is that presidential authoritarian regimes have mainly excelled in deepening poverty and worsening the people's miseries. How is NEPAD going to reverse this historical trend?

Having rubbed shoulders with most of the African leaders, and being very knowledgeable of how the corridors of power work in Africa, we are grateful today to have Prof. Adebayo Adedeji to launch the first salvo in discussing NEPAD at this forum as our key-note speaker. I am more than honored to introduce Bayo, one of Africa's most illustrious sons: scholar, author, researcher, policy-maker, advisor to many governments—even when they do not take his advice. Bayo is at the moment **heading the African Center for Development and Strategic Studies (ACDESS)** in his hometown in Nigeria. He holds a doctorate in economics from the University of London, has been given many honors, and has lectured widely in Africa and the rest of the world. In 1975, way before discussions of democracy became acceptable in official circles, he gave the Tom Mboya Memorial Lecture here in Nairobi on the topic **“Pluralism as a factor in Africa's development and Modernization.”**

Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you, with humility as well as tremendous pride, Chief Adebayo Adedeji.