

Reflections on Ownership Debates

Political will key to untangle constraints to ownership of development

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Introduction

The development assistance system was established with the purposeful objective of creating economic wealth to improve the well being of citizens of the developing world. However, it has evolved to become a tool for exploitation of those it is supposed to assist.

In recent years, despite growing realization amongst donor countries that ownership is an important determinant of development assistance performance, discussions on the issue have remained mostly descriptive; merely seeking to explain why, what, where, when and how ownership does (or does not) exist, is strong (or weak). We believe discussions should be prescriptive as well as they should actively seek *genuine* ownership of economic development process by recipient countries.

In the following discussion, (i) "ownership" shall mean the extent to which a government is fully committed to, directly involved in, in control of, and accountable for economic development policies and development assistance program of a country; (ii) "economic development" shall mean the effort that seeks to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating economic wealth; and (iii) "development assistance" shall mean the peculiar world of "foreign aid" transfers organized and managed by the governments of rich (donor) countries to finance activities in poor (developing) countries. We will focus on Sub-Saharan Africa (hereinafter referred to simply as Africa) where instead of being a transformational process - that can only come from within as a result of activities carried out - by the recipient country, economic development is being externally imposed by development assistance organizations.

The underlying context of development assistance

The existing economic (and political) world order is geared towards preserving the wealth, power and influence of donor countries over developing countries (UN, IFIs, WTO, etc.). To discuss ownership without consideration of the underlying context in which aid is being delivered can only perpetuate a biased pretension of objectivity and apoliticism clearly overlooking and disregarding a critical aspect to true ownership.

In the new world order, despite the humanitarian and economic development discourse in which it is packaged, Western development assistance is just one of the tools in the arsenal of world politics (not the only one, though). Whereas the political system exerts the strongest power on economic matters, the economic system extracts maximum benefits from developing countries - once their "growth" enhances markets for the industrialized countries - to shape a one-sided and exploitative relationship.

Recipient countries are persuaded (even coerced) into adopting the "right policies" (donor recommended policies), and are supposed to own them. If the "right policy" recommendations are not adopted, donors adopt non-constructive (sometimes irrational) actions to pressure recipients into falling in-line. The manufacture of consent has become an art-form required of development assistance organizations.

Although it has been shown that development assistance organizations often disregard known solutions instead preferring idealistic solutions that often don't work, failure is usually attributed to recipient countries that are charged with incapacity, bad governance, and foot-dragging on "liberalization" reforms. Any attempts at challenging such characterization are short-circuited with labels such as Africans are paranoid, always expressing contempt or good at excusing failure. To make matters worse, Western funded think tanks (a multitude of them) facilitate donors' goals by providing rhetorical material that is used as smokescreens and for public distraction and confusion while relevant issues are ignored or downplayed. Ultimately, such analytical justifications get published in scientific journals giving the (not-always-true) arguments an aura of authority. Nevertheless, every time their well meaning rhetoric meets the actual implementation record it evaporates in a cloud of hypocrisy.

Africa entrapped

In Africa, despite fifty years of development effort, many people are worse off today than they were at independence. In many countries life expectancies have fallen, literacy rates have declined, and individuals' economic prospects have plummeted. With such dismal performance, Western development assistance is viewed as merely the post-colonial form of economic exploitation now carried in collusion with internal allies - the selfish, incompetent, corrupt and inarticulate Western-controlled-and-protected-so-called leaders and elites in Africa.

Development goals for African countries often call for the sacrifice of their national economies to an international economy that neither considers nor protects them. Despite this injustice, the mantra of the G8 is simply that greater world trade will "eventually" benefit everyone. Halleluiah!

African governments often give into imposed conditions knowing well that they will not serve their nation's best interests, in part because they overwhelmingly need funds to tackle the multitude of development problems they face. Unfortunately, they are left with no other recourse, as the World Bank and the IMF - institutions that are supposed to look after the interests of the poorest countries - are instruments of Western donors' policies.

Obviously, with the large differentials in power and resources between donors and recipient countries, it has become extremely difficult for African countries to pursue a development path different from the path dictated by the mainstream "world" economic system controlled by a few countries in the West.

Ever since colonization, external forces have (and continue to) shaped Africa's economic future with supposedly well-meaning ideals. What these noble (or not

so noble!) purposes, grand designs, have revealed is that the economic development model prescribed for Africa is fundamentally flawed. Fifty years on, economic development is still an elusive dream, and will remain so unless there is fundamental change in the attitude of Western nations towards fostering genuine partnerships for development.

By emphasizing industrialization as the means to rapid economic development, the current development assistance system oversells the technological approach leading to development assistance in which African countries are seen as in need of a technological fix, thus resulting in inappropriate policies unsuited to particular countries needs and context. Because the system addresses only the symptoms of underdevelopment, it should be reformed to address the root causes of underdevelopment.

Reforming the development assistance system

Because fifty years after Africa's independence the current development assistance system has been ineffective in achieving economic development and poverty eradication objectives, and considering that even among western donors, sharing a relatively straightforward and apolitical goal – to reduce poverty and advance democracy (in many places in Africa they condone a farce!) – cooperation and coordination in development assistance have been all too often in short supply, the current system of development assistance needs to be reformed to provide hope for genuine ownership of economic development.

Past attempts to reform have brought more of the same since years have come and gone and the very same external pressures have prevailed. Not only were these attempts mostly half-hearted, they resulted in changes that were smartly pegged at - merely replacing, re-naming or re-branding decried practices - preserving the status-quo. Ultimately, they have largely been ineffectual or slow to ignite appropriate reactions and corrective responses. Any reform short of a drastic change in its basic approach will merely lead to patch solutions that only scratch the surface.

For any new reform to be far-reaching there needs to be a recognition that changes should not just be about new actions in developing countries, by developing countries but also about changes (especially in attitudes) by Western donors and in Western countries. Many lessons have been learned from past failures. The most important, perhaps, is for Western donors to accept that their knowledge of economic development in Africa (and of Africa itself) is extremely incomplete; which calls for humility in the manner in which economic policy advice is provided. The challenge would be to accommodate different perspectives in the reformed development assistance system.

Way forward

Because economic development is underpinned by political process, only political action geared to deal with deeper underlying causes of symptoms can bring about and sustain development-promoting environments in African countries. We believe the development structure most likely to result in sustainable

development in Africa is one that utilizes an overlapping mix of policies and programmes to best match institutional strengths with the problems at hand. It's not blueprints, but processes that are needed. This means paying attention to settings, and improvising.

Although it is accepted that, a typical process moves step by step from achievement of small victories to the gaining of confidence and allies, to the winning of wider victories, thence to challenging the rules of the game and negotiating new ones, donors want immediate results leaving no room to learn from mistakes.

African countries need to be given the opportunity to explore ideas of their own that are not in-line with the conventional wisdom of major donors. Therefore, together they (donors and recipients) should embark more on studies of the links between poverty and inequality within as well as between nations, looking for appropriate avenues of direct political action at the local as well as international level (e.g.: more democratic international institutions).

Ownership requires that a country have sufficient institutional capacity for defining and implementing a national development strategy. This vital, but slow, work of building institutions needs a participatory process that will be unique to the country's culture and circumstances. In Africa, public authorities and social movements should be helped not to march to the beat of the donors' drums but to gain policy knowledge useful to built overall negotiations competency. Public processes would need help not in indoctrinating more technocrats in fundamentalist orthodoxies, but in promoting "economic literacy" and the oversight of public choices by way of local media, civil society watchdog groups, and technical advisory bodies with autonomy from both business and government. These measures can be combined in ways that strengthen trust and public control at the recipient's end.

Conclusion

The Western model of economic development is not and should not be the *only* road to economic development. For fifty years it has advocated an undesirable mimetic development model based on a distorted Western consumerism that rarely corresponds to the population's fundamental needs and is beyond the reach of the poor. Africa should be allowed to **discover** and **own** a development matrix suited to its own conditions.

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