



Underdevelopment and Poverty in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract:

The Pre-Colonial African concepts of development emphasized the material wellbeing of the community in a local subsistence economy. The modern Post-Colonial African states integrated in a complex global political economy requires technological production in the competitive international economic environment. An environment dictated and driven by Neo-Liberal ideology of the western industrial countries who are well equipped to compete with other countries with infant industries, as in Africa. This competition called free trade implied lack of protection for local infant industries in Africa. Under the Euro- American politically led government deregulation and privatization; there have been various consequences of underdevelopment and poverty in contemporary Africa. This paper examines the impact of neo-liberal policies in contemporary African political economy in the search for alternative paradigms for African development. The research methodology is the qualitative, descriptive approach and the submission of the paper is that African state must devise ways of achieving an African version of economic integration through the linkage of basic infrastructure such as the continental rail road starting from the sub-regions.

Keywords:

Underdevelopment, Liberalism and Poverty, Government Policies, International Laws

Introduction:

This paper examines the relationships that exist in the implementation of the policy of economic liberalism, and the contemporary realities of underdevelopment of African states' economies. It attempts to contribute to the debate on African underdevelopment, with the aim of achieving alternative paradigms for the socio-economic and political development of the African peoples. To achieve these objectives, the paper is divided into seven sections. Section one attempts to analyze a theoretical framework that would help to illuminate the discourse, section two re-examines the high expectations by the African peoples for the rapid development of Africa at independence, while the third section is the examination of the lessons from the pre-colonial, community led local agricultural economy, the fourth section is a review of the performance of the African states economy during the import substitution phase, while the fifth section also examines the performance of the African states economy under the policy of neo-liberalism, the last session is the concluding part, where attempts were made to recommend an alternative paradigm for the development of Africa.

Theoretical Framework

The contemporary phase of underdevelopment in Africa is a product of the relationships of the African states and the more technologically advanced countries in a neo-liberal global economic environment. So, it is important to understand the theoretical assumptions of neo-liberalism before interrogating the processes of underdevelopment through the analysis of other theories that have illuminated the discourse of underdevelopment in Africa. No doubt, from the middle of the 1980s, neo-liberalism effectively emerged as the dominant ideology of global capitalism. [Harvey \(2005\)](#) asserts that neo-liberalism is the ideological project of a resurgent political right wing of the advanced capitalist societies. The term neo-liberalism according to [Steger and Roy \(2011\)](#) was popularized by the economist John Williamson in his policy advice to the monetarist institutions.

Many scholars contend that in advancing the neo-liberal agenda globally, by the "Third Way" movement associated with leaders such as Bill Clinton in the U.S., Tony Blair in Britain, and

Gerhard Schroder in Germany, who according to these scholars, sought to move their Centre-left parties in more "market friendly" directions [Dumenil and Levy \(2011\)](#). Neo-liberalism is also identified here as a political ideology associated with economic globalization as it evolved from the 1930s to the 1970s, and classical liberalism with the competitive capitalism of the 19th century [Dumenil and Levy \(2011\)](#). Neo-liberalism was defined by [Harvey \(2005\)](#) as a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms. The theory views the role of the state in the context to be just for the creation and preservation of the institutional framework appropriate for such practices.

Again, neo-liberalism should be seen first and foremost as an economic discourse. Its espousal of market based solutions to economic problems was highlighted in the 1970s, when, according to [Rittel and Webber \(1973\)](#), state planning and expert-led processes proved to be less able to satisfy the interest of capital, a kind of acquisitive appetite, that this paper would want to define as psychotic individualism. This definition could be properly appreciated when viewed from the revelations that stunned the world in the wake of the economic melt-down, especially in the USA. It is necessary to state here that the proponents of the neo-liberal ideology were able to achieve their objectives because of the obvious problem of the simultaneous price inflation and rising underemployment in the Western capitalist societies by the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which had not been considered possible in Keynesian economic theories, [Chase-Dunn and Peter \(1995\)](#). Harvey observes that the short coming of the Keynesian economic theories opened up the scope for new economic ideas to hold grounds. He further pointed out that these ideas were a complex fusion of theories, including monetarism, rational expectations theories, public choice theory, supply side economics and others, whose central thesis was that government intervention was the problem rather than the solution for entrepreneurial activities to be aligned correctly [Harvey \(2005\)](#).

It is a truism that the nexus between Western capital and their leading university economics departments, with regard to the propagation of the theory of neo-liberalism has not been fully explored.

It is imperative to this paper to state that under the patronage of Western capital the propagation of this theory became a scientific ideology of such Western institutions and various think tanks, like the Institute for Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute in the U.K., American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation and others in the U.S.A, as well as in the western business media [Harvey \(2005\)](#). Again, it is important to note at this juncture that the propagation of the theory of neo-liberalism has eventually taken a religious hue that has made the ideology to be rightly called market fundamentalism, in its global agenda. Despite its inherent contradictions noticeable from the global economic melt-down that saw the intervention of the governments of the USA and other Western capitalist countries in their economies, there seem to be no anti-thesis so far to this ideology of market fundamentalism. The obvious limitations of the practices and processes of neo-liberalism is the emergence of a class of capitalists, who have manifested the symptom that this paper has earlier described as psychotic individualism, as they are engaged in a historic commoditization of every aspects of human life.

The narrative of neo-liberalism in Africa began by the middle of 1980s, when African states, one after the other, embarked on the restructuring programs dictated by the monetarist and neo-liberal institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the creditor nations, such as the Paris Club, as well as the financial Institutions of the creditor nations, such as the London Club. It is important to state here that under the various kinds of economic and trade relationships between African states and these technologically advanced countries, the fortunes of these African states have not fared very well. The international political economy of free trade to the African states' economies appears to be a benign relationship with the technologically advanced countries but it is truly an asphyxiating reality to the African peoples, in the failure of their states and the plethora of crises attendant to the failure of the states.

Accordingly, it is important to this discourse to underline the fact that various theories have been in contention with imperialism, neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism in Africa. Some of these theories includes the Dependency theory which originated in

Latin America during the 1960s, with Andre Gunder Frank as the leading exponent of the theory. The theory is a dissection of the historical processes that led to underdevelopment in an age when the dominant international development ideology was the modernization theory [Frank \(1969\)](#). The Dependency theory had developed the notion that some countries manifested underdevelopment because they are exploited by the more technologically advanced countries, that is, the exploitation of their natural and human resources which helps to boost the economy of the more advanced industrialized countries, thereby leading to a center-periphery relationship. According to [Walter \(2000\)](#), the periphery countries are compelled to provide natural resources, labour, and markets for the developed countries at a relatively cheap rate in exchange for capital and loans.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the two theories outlined above deals with the various phases of underdevelopment in Africa. For instance, during the early independence years when majority of the African states made effort to become industrialized, the dependency theory was very adequate in understanding the structure of the global political economy where the African economy had been historically peripheral. From the middle of the 1980's when the structural adjustment programme heralded the neo-liberal policy regime, which has seen the increasing underdevelopment of African states, the World system theory appears to be a more apt framework for analyzing the problems of underdevelopment in Africa. This fact is self-evident from the contemporary history of African states' economies, in their increasing reliance on foreign aid, with the continuous deficit in their respective budgets, their consistently high debt profile, despite debts cancellation for some of the countries, and the plague of poor global prices for their primary export products. The dominance of neo-liberalism in the African economy in the name of global free trade has made African states' economies to become dumping grounds for the core countries and the semi-peripheral countries in their trade relations.

The Development of Africa in the Immediate Post-Independence Years

The high hope expressed by the African peoples for the development of the continent at

independence could be better understood in the light of the assertions of J.F. Ade Ajayi, that independence meant more than just freedom from colonial rule to the African peoples. According to him “insofar as they appreciated what was involved in the independence movement, their basic expectation was to see an end to unpredictability and irrationality of the white man’s rule....” [Ade Ajayi \(1982\)](#). He articulated the general convictions of the African peoples with regard to the import of independence to their lives as independent nations. It is obvious that to the Africans, independence implied freedom from unjust and incomprehensible laws and directives; return of their lands; and freedom to be left alone to live their lives and seek their own goals, especially in regard to land tenure and local government groupings that had affected their inter-group historical relationships. The foregoing is a testament of the general feelings and state of mind of the African peoples as their colonial territories gained independence [Uroh \(1988\)](#).

However, the realities in almost all independent African states have consistently been a paradox [Okolo \(2003\)](#). The relentless struggle of the majority of Africans to eke out a living has been an uphill task. Basically, their desires and agitations for good governance and development, due to the unfortunate situations of pervasive poverty have remained a pipe dream, in the context of the diabolical struggle for power, by their ruling elites.

In the same vein, [Dimowo \(1999\)](#), argues that the subject matter of development defies any precise definition as economists are hardly agreed on what constitutes national development. He observed however, that there is a consensus of opinion that national development is somewhat synonymous with economic development. Corroborating the assertions of [Dimowo, Adelakun \(1999\)](#), contends that the concept of development has been variously defined by scholars, government agents and practitioners of the process, and that policies and programs aimed at effecting development have thus been conceived, implemented and evaluated from different points of view and perspectives.

Historically speaking, [Rodney \(1972\)](#) seem to be one of the most outstanding scholars of development studies and his submission is that

development in human society is a many sided process.

African Agricultural Development from Pre-Colonial Era to the Modern Period.

The dominant activity in pre-colonial Africa was agriculture. In all sedentary communities in Africa, people took time to study their environments and tried to develop techniques for managing the existential nature of such environments in a progressively rational manner. Therefore, before the imposition of colonialism, the pre-occupation of the gross majority of the peoples of Africa, was specifically subsistence farming, which included fishing and animal husbandry. The import of the agricultural economy in the pre-colonial era was very deep in the culture of the African peoples before advent of the colonial masters. First and foremost, the community centered agricultural activities defined what was to be cultivated as food for the various households that constituted the societies, even though at a subsistence level. However, the imposition of colonialism completely changed African agricultural production, to be a source of national revenue in the colonial and post-colonial economies [Adelakun \(1999\)](#).

Consequently, the cash crop economies that were inherited by the nationalist-independence leaders became the main stay of the various African states. In most of the African states foreign merchant companies continued to dominate the export of the cash crops. Therefore, despite large land areas being cultivated for the cash crop economies, what became the reality was that the ruling African elites used the instrumentality of their positions in their states to transfer their states’ resources, from their agricultural economies, which were based in the rural communities, to enrich themselves in their urban settings [Akintoye \(1976\)](#).

5. Import Substitution Economies in Post-Colonial Africa

At the threshold of political independence in most of the African states, the colonial masters, successfully promoted the idea of import substitution industrial development strategy, which created the impression that the African states were successfully industrializing. The facade of a modern industrial sector made the African states economies to become more dependent on importation [Beggs et al \(2003\)](#). With the revenue derived from the

agricultural export economies that were already experiencing disarticulation, due to the problem of elite corruption and the various attractions created in the urban settings that had been luring the rural people to the urban settings, import dependency syndrome led to consistent balance of payment problems and underdevelopment [Akintoye \(1976\)](#).

Overtime, the phenomenon of rural-urban migration became an aspect of the culture of modern Africans states. The lure of the cities with their unfounded prospects of upward social mobility, increasingly accentuated the social-economic disarticulation already taking place in the agricultural economies based in the rural communities [Akintoye \(1976\)](#). The nationalists-independence leaders were eager to develop their agricultural export-extractive economies, by establishing industries to produce goods that were hitherto being imported from the advanced countries, through the imposition of high tariffs or import quota on such imports.

The implication of this policy of import substitution as a strategy for the development of African economies was that they were using more domestic resources to manufacture products, than were required to produce cash crops for export, which provides revenue that would finance import of manufactures. During this phase of their efforts at developing their economies, these African states wanted to reduce their dependence on their primary commodities and extractive economies, and also, most importantly they associated a developed industrial sector with the high productivity levels visible in the rich industrial countries. There were a lot of constraints in embarking on this strategy of economic development. The reality was that although it seemed that the domestic industries in the African economies expanded behind their tariff barriers, while imports were being replaced, in a process whereby they were able to attained levels of import substitution, however, their economic growth and expected development eventually came to a halt. Their industrial sectors overtime, manifested a comparative disadvantage. [Begg, et al \(2003\)](#), argue that though import substitution as a strategy for economic development was constrained by comparative disadvantage, yet comparative advantage is a dynamic not a static concept.

However, African states were not able to make the transition from import substitution to the phase of export led growth, which stresses production and income growth, through exports, rather than the displacement of import [Gronemeyer \(2000\)](#).

6. African Development through Neo-Liberal Policies

As far as African countries were concerned, the policies of neo-liberalism were imposed on their debt burdened economies, in a situation where they had no choice. From the 1980s, African countries were forced to increase their integration within the international market economy in one way or another, in the consolidation of their peripheral position. This led to their increasing dependence on the advanced capitalist nations and their monetarist institutions like, the World Bank, IMF, the Paris Club and London Club. In almost all fronts, in terms of their socio-economic activities, African states were impacted by the policies of market fundamentalism, which became their existential realities. The dramatic change in economic planning and development, in virtually all African states from the 1980s, were clearly illustrated by the policy of structural adjustment program. An intriguing thing about neo-liberalism was it seemingly absolutist nature that has made the frame work of the market to become the only and inevitable path, to the development of the African states' economies, with its innumerable difficulties and setbacks.

Indeed, the generally accepted argument in contemporary Africa is that neo-liberal capitalist development is the only pathway to achieving improvement in the material conditions of the African peoples. In this light, by the turn of the 21st Century, it was already a concluded matter of historical fact, that the neo-liberal framework of the market is the basis for the regulation of the African society as a whole. The neo-liberal market policies therefore became the only principles for guiding individual and collective actions [Gronemeyer \(2000\)](#).

With the increasing consolidation of the forces of neo-liberalism, given its global interconnectedness through the market, with the fundamental role of the neo-liberal multilateral institutions and organizations, like the IMF, World Bank, WTO, the Paris Club, London Club, including the various United Nations Bodies that were developed to

facilitate the integration of the world economy, African states are now fully consolidated in their peripheral positions. It has become obvious to the African peoples, that in the new reality, it is what the neo-liberalists calls development that is being regurgitated by their national ruling elites. Therefore, this paper contends, in agreement with [Esteva \(2000\)](#), that this ideology of market fundamentalism has expectedly engendered the growth of psychotic individualism, which has seen the rise of a few ultra-rich individuals who are devoted, through unconscionable processes of exploitation, to making economic profits, at the expense of the whole gamut of social and moral obligations.

This kind of commoditization of life, that has no limits whatsoever, aided by techno science and the market which started with technological innovations in key sectors, like information and telecommunication, and biogenetics, has swept the whole of Africa, thus making it the only medium of social regulations. African governments and their peoples do not have any leverage in the system driven by techno science, with its framework of a free market economy. A global economic environment where virtually almost all African states are tied down, by increasing burden of foreign debts, it appears that the vicious cycle will remain in Africa for a long time [Randhawa \(2005\)](#). This fact would become more glaring when African peoples understand that the foreign aid that their states receive are mostly tied aid. The limited prospects for African states' development will become more obvious in these contexts, whereby the bilateral and multilateral relationships between African states and the donor countries, their institutions, and organizations, are actually defined by the framework and processes, of neo-liberalism [Randhawa \(2005\)](#).

In the short and long run, it is the African's inept and docile leadership, in their politics, and in the major sectors of their economies, and their foreign partners, that had benefited from the various aid that the African states have received over the years, which have accumulated as foreign debts [Adedeji \(1982\)](#). In an age of free trade, with the African economies being used as dumping grounds, by the advanced industrialized countries and the newly industrializing countries, especially China and other

Asian countries, their export led industrialization prospects have remain a pipe dream.

The long and short of the experience of the African states in the age of economic globalization, have been increasing under development [Dube \(1988\)](#). From the beginning of the independence era, African leaders were ambitious in articulating various development plans, and their development strategies were originally promoted by their states through a regulated market framework. The general consensus then, was that the states should exercise the Benthamite function of realizing the greatest happiness for the greatest number, regulating the market for economic growth, the results of which was supposed to be distributed as fairly, as possible throughout their societies.

With the liberalization of the African economies from the 1980s, economic growth without any redistribution at all, became the norm, in the face of the withdrawal of the state from the markets. In this context, the grave implication has been that their socio-economic life and its prospects are being regulated through the markets, as the only means for resolving the endemic problem of poverty in Africa, without the smallest contribution being imposed upon the ruling political and commercial elites and the multinational corporations. The imposition of neo-liberalism, by the World Bank and IMF in concert with the creditor nations, on the African states' has seen the perpetuation of underdevelopment in the African states' economies.

The Search for an Ideal Strategy for the Development of African States

The African state must improve African society and the lot of its peoples. The failure of the states to improve their societies makes them to lack a high degree of hegemony, which would enable them to control contending forces, build strong structures, promote national accumulation of their resources, and create an environment for self-sustaining growth and development. African states must build the people, the society, promote their interests, build confidence in the state which will promote state hegemony, and in that process democracy will flourish.

The bane of African development has been the factor of bad, insensitive, arrogant and ineffective leadership that has failed to inspire the people. African states generally have been unfortunate to

produce leadership that do not possess qualities of compassion, vision, education, capacity, capability, dignity, exposure, hard work, consultation, ability to listen and a clear and real track record of service to the people. African states must build new visions, new voices, new hopes and new leaderships at all levels. This could be achieved through the deliberate and clearly coordinated policies and programs of governments and non-governmental agencies. African states must develop and strengthen the curricular of their educational and informal institutions to cater for the training of new leadership.

The governments of African states must develop a constitutional vision of building successor generation of leadership. The new leadership that African direly need must be built upon the foundation of service, loyalty, discipline and the promotion of civil society, in both national and community development. African states must deliberately and consciously ensure that emphasis is laid on the teaching of social and civic studies as well as history. African states must encourage creativity, courage and innovation and also reward hard work and achievement. African leadership must articulate a holistic strategy for leadership development.

The political parties in Africa must be truly and fully reformed for the mobilization of the African peoples. For Africans to develop and overcome the challenges confronting them, their political parties must become organized according to the rule of law, social justice and equity, to produce credible, capable, courageous and visionary leaders that will build the political economy and consolidate democratic institutions and practices.

There is the need for political, constitutional and electoral reforms in Africa. The constitutions of African states must be the true and honest reflection of the wishes, hopes and dreams of their peoples, who must collectively and consciously develop it as a compact for their existence. What African states generally need is the development of participating constitutions that would serve as the mechanism for the mobilization of their peoples. African states' constitutions should emerge from a participating, people driven, consultative and bottom up approach. The fact is that constitutions are strategic weapons for addressing the various questions that are

challenges to their survival. African states should also understand that as a veritable weapon for the mobilization of their peoples, the constitution is an instrument for increasing political education and establishing and sustaining the foundation of democratic politics. Thus, it is therefore clear that the constitutions of African states must be translated into their various local languages to make it accessible to all.

The struggle for democracy and transformation in Africa must therefore continue to wax strong. This inevitably calls for the opening of the democratic spaces, the mobilization of the people, the reform and strengthening of institutions and structures of the African society, the empowerment of the generality of the people and the fight to eliminate corruption. African peoples must also begin to re-establish the various cultural values that are fundamental to the peace and co-existence of their communities which should be articulated into what they compacted as their constitutions.

African states must make conscious and deliberate efforts to integrate their economies. Intra-African trade should be encouraged. Integrated transportation and communication, as well as a common currency, would enhance exchange of goods and services. African states must also understand, based on their histories of aid dependence and the burden of foreign debts, that what they actually need is not foreign aid, rather access to the markets of the advanced industrial economies and the newly industrializing countries, relevant technology and support for the process of transformation and empowerment of their people and their institutions.

Conclusion

Historically speaking, Africa stands behind almost other continents with regards to all indices of growth and development. Despite the initial euphoria of becoming independent, majority of the African states, in their immediate Post-Independence period, became increasingly underdeveloped through an international political economy that structured their various economies in a neo-colonial, peripheral set up. The age of globalization in the neo-liberal economic reforms, completely jaundiced earlier efforts of the African states to develop. The history of neo-liberalism in Africa, which started in the 1980s, with the

structural adjustment programme, greatly challenged the survival of the African peoples in these states that were generally undemocratic.

Now that it is obvious that the policies of neo-liberalism seem to be the absolutist and sovereign economic ideology which African states must continue to follow religiously, in an age whereby they are mostly aid dependent, it is important for the peoples of Africa to become truly mobilized for their collective transformation and development, in an integrated African economy, where they would be able to collectively muster their bargaining power vis-à-vis the external world. If African states are indeed determined to embark on the path of socio-economic development of their continent they should realize that their humble beginning, on the path of their economic integration, would be the construction of transport and other basic infrastructure, possibly from the sub-regional levels, to link up the entire continent. This would be necessarily followed up with the development of other fundamental integrative structures which, all together, would open up the various potentials of the continent to the African peoples and other positive external dynamics.

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