
AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNMENT: IS NEPAD ALREADY PASSÉ?

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Introduction

Three years after the launch of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), it is fair to ponder whether the programme is still worth taking seriously.¹ The origins of NEPAD can be found in South African president Thabo Mbeki's late 1990s determination to establish an 'African Renaissance'. Poignant poetics were gradually infused with content, initially in the secretive *Millennium Africa Recovery Plan*, whose powerpoint skeleton was unveiled during 2000: to Bill Clinton in May, the Okinawa G-8 meeting in July, the United Nations Millennium Summit in September, and a subsequent European Union gathering in Portugal. The skeleton was fleshed out in November 2000 with the assistance of several economists and was immediately ratified during a special South African visit by World Bank president James Wolfensohn. By this stage, Mbeki managed to sign on as partners two additional figures from the crucial North and West of the continent: Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Olusegun Obasanjo from Nigeria. But these allies came under mass protests and oversaw various civil, military, religious and ethnic disturbances at home, diminishing their utility as model African leaders.

The July 2001 meeting of the African Union in Lusaka gave Mbeki the opportunity for a continent-wide leadership endorsement, once his plan was merged with an infrastructure-project initiative - the 'Omega Plan' - offered by Senegalese president, Abdoulaye Wade, to become the *New African Initiative*. Soon afterwards,

Mbeki's role at the Genoa G-8 summit assisted the world's political rulers, as 300,000 protesters gathered outside the conference. After another name change, NEPAD was publicly launched in Abuja, Nigeria, by several African heads of state on 23 October 2001. The document was later termed 'philosophically spot-on' by the Bush regime's lead Africa official, Walter Kansteiner (Gopinath 2003), and warmly endorsed by the World Bank and IMF.

NEPAD's core elements include the deeper insertion of Africa into the world economy (in spite of the even more rapid decline in terms of trade since the late 1990s); more privatisation, especially of infrastructure (no matter its failure, especially in South Africa); multi-party elections (typically, though, between variants of neoliberal parties, as in the US, which serves as a veil for the lack of thorough-going participatory democracy); grand visions of information and communications technology (hopelessly unrealistic considering the lack of simple reliable electricity across the continent); and a self-mandate for peace-keeping (which South Africa has subsequently taken for its soldiers stationed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi).

Criticisms from African intellectuals and social movements have been sharp. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa and Third World Network-Africa issued a statement following an April 2002 conference summarising the problems.

The most fundamental flaws of NEPAD, which reproduce the central elements of the World Bank's *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* and the ECA's *Compact for African Recovery*, include:

- The neoliberal economic policy framework at the heart of the plan, which repeats the structural adjustment policy packages of the preceding two decades and overlooks the disastrous effects of those policies;
- The fact that in spite of its proclaimed

recognition of the central role of the African people to the plan, the African people have not played any part in the conception, design and formulation of NEPAD;

- Notwithstanding its stated concerns for social and gender equity, it adopts the social and economic measures that have contributed to the marginalisation of women;
- That in spite of claims of African origins, its main targets are foreign donors, particularly in the G8;
- Its vision of democracy is defined by the needs of creating a functional market;
- It under-emphasises the external conditions fundamental to Africa's developmental crisis, and thereby does not promote any meaningful measure to manage and restrict the effects of this environment on Africa development efforts. On the contrary, the engagement that it seeks with institutions and processes like the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, the United States Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, the Cotonou Agreement, will further lock Africa's economies disadvantageously into this environment;
- The means for mobilisation of resources will further the disintegration of African economies that we have witnessed at the hands of structural adjustment and WTO rules.²

NEPAD's credibility on governance has been thrown into question by the ongoing Zimbabwe fiasco. According to Pretoria's then Trade Minister Alec Erwin, just as Robert Mugabe was stealing a presidential election in Zimbabwe in early 2002: 'The West should not hold the NEPAD hostage because of mistakes in Zimbabwe. If NEPAD is not owned and implemented by Africa it will fail; we cannot be held hostage to the political whims of the G8 or any other groups' (Taylor 2002).

But ownership and implementation looked like low priorities to many Africans, for at

the next African Union gathering, in Durban, Thabo Mbeki complained that very few African heads of state were even attending meetings. And in Maputo in July 2003, the generally pro-Mbeki *Sunday Times* wrote:

The George Dubya of Africa: Even as he relinquishes the reins of the African Union, Thabo Mbeki is regarded with suspicion by other African leaders... In the corridors they call him the George Bush of Africa, leading the most powerful nation in the neighbourhood and using his financial and military muscle to further his own agenda (13 July 2003).

What is that agenda? Nelson Mandela may have been diplomatic – or disturbingly frank – when in mid-2003 he launched the Mandela Rhodes Foundation at Rhodes House in Cape Town, the former De Beers corporate headquarters. De Beers was, at the time, a high-profile defendant in Jubilee South Africa and apartheid victim lawsuits to reclaim apartheid profits. Mandela not only condemned the suits (which in turn contributed to their dismissal from the New York courts in November 2004), but his speech also contained a positive reference to the company founder's sub-imperial role: 'I am sure that Cecil John Rhodes would have given his approval to this effort to make the South African economy of the early 21st century appropriate and fit for its time'³.

Today the most important ways that South African corporate investments in the region foster economic relations in the tradition of Rhodes are through retail trade, mining, agricultural technology and the NEPAD private infrastructure investment strategy. The terrain is terribly uneven, with NEPAD in particular so far failing to attract the desired privatisation ('public-private partnership') resources. 'In three years not a single company has invested in plan's 20 high-profile infrastructure development projects' [roads, energy, water, telecommunications, ports], according to *Business Day* in mid-2004. In contrast, a 2002 World Economic Forum meeting in Durban provided NEPAD with endorse-

ments from 187 major companies, including Anglo American, BHP Billiton, Absa Bank and Microsoft. According to the programme's chief economist, Mohammed Jahed, 'NEPAD is reliant upon the success of these infrastructure projects, so we need to rethink how we will get the private sector involved, because clearly they have not played the role we expected' (Rose 2004).

Thus while Johannesburg capital is indeed moving rapidly into the region, just as in Rhodes' time, there seems to be a disconnect between longer-term, public-oriented investments within the NEPAD portfolio, and the short-term self-interest of corporations. Actions taken by Pretoria bureaucrats, including the Department of Trade and Industry, do not correspond to the integrative investment strategies proposed by the NEPAD secretariat. Hence NEPAD's function has *not* been, so far, to boost profits for South African and allied businesses in the 20 major projects. Darlene Miller concludes her nuanced analysis of NEPAD and Johannesburg capital's interests with crucial caveats: 'different appropriations of African identity are possible within such a neoliberal Africanism' in view of the business sector's 'modernisation notions of development that are a throwback to colonial times'. She contrasts this approach with 'African Renaissance ideology' and its 'pre-colonial and anti-colonial sentiment'. Still, notwithstanding such divergences, there is 'ideological commonality' (Miller 2004).

Political NEPAD

At first blush, the most hopeful political intervention from the African Union and NEPAD was a set of peacekeeping efforts in West African hotspots and the Great Lakes region. However, the particularly difficult Burundi and DRC terrains of war were riven with deep-seated rivalries and socio-economic desperation, which Pretoria did not comprehend, much less resolve. In 2003, prominent South African officials – Mandela, who was chief mediator in

Burundi, Mbeki, Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Deputy President Jacob Zuma – facilitated two power-sharing peace deals in these countries, but left the underlying contradictions intact.

The papering-over efforts did not halt the massacre of hundreds in the northeast of the DRC the day of the celebrated Sun City peace deal. Nor did it succeed in bringing key Burundian rebel leaders to the table for many months. Millions have died in the DRC, and hundreds of thousands in Burundi. On the surface, Pretoria's senior conflict mediation in central Africa during 2003 appeared positive. However, closer to the ground, the agreements more closely resemble the style of elite deals which lock in place 'low-intensity democracy' and neoliberal economic regimes.

One can only hope that Pretoria's peace deals will stick. Yet the interventions were characterised by top-down decisions from the presidency, and apparently neglected consultation with the SA National Defence Force or Foreign Affairs, much less African parliaments and societies. Trying to police the global capitalist periphery required more common sense in relation to the root causes of conflict, because without making provision for total debt cancellation in Burundi, for example, the massive drain on that country's resources is a recipe for conflict. In 1998, as strife became endemic, Burundi spent nearly 40% of its export earnings on debt repayment.

The Global Climate for NEPAD

The broader problem of a hostile international context was, simultaneously, being addressed by other Mbeki initiatives. Pretoria's lead politicians were allowed, during the late 1990s, to preside over the UN Security Council, the board of governors of the IMF and World Bank, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Commonwealth, the World Commission on Dams and many other important global and continental

bodies. Simultaneously taking Third World leadership, Pretoria also headed the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organisation of African Unity and the Southern African Development Community. Then, during a frenetic two-year period beginning in September 2001, Mbeki and his colleagues hosted, led, or were instrumental in a dozen major international conferences or events. However, virtually nothing was accomplished through these opportunities.

Consider a few hypothetical questions in relation to Pretoria's strategy and alignments:

- Instead of selling \$250 million worth of arms to the Iraq War aggressors – the United States and the United Kingdom – and warmly welcoming George W. Bush a few weeks after his illegal occupation of Baghdad, what if Mbeki had taken the lead of Mandela (before his 2004 retraction) and explicitly punished Bush with a snub, and strengthened anti-war resistance and even US/UK boycotts in venues like the Non-Aligned Movement and African Union?
- Instead of rejecting reparations struggles to punish international financiers, corporations and the Bretton Woods institutions for supporting apartheid, what if Mbeki and his colleagues had nurtured the anti-racism cause, for the sake of both repairing apartheid's racial and socio-economic damage and warning big capital off future relations with odious regimes?
- Instead of battling the global justice movement and African trade officials from Seattle through Doha to Cancun, what if Trade Minister Erwin had tried uniting the continent and its allies behind a counter-hegemonic trade agenda so as to meet popular needs, not those of global capital?
- Instead of rejecting debt cancellation as a strategy, what if Manuel had joined the Jubilee movement, denounced bogus World Bank and IMF plans for crumbs of relief in the midst of amplified neoliberalism, and helped to organise a debtors' cartel?

- Instead of exacerbating the World Summit on Sustainable Development's orientation to commodification, not to mention repressing legitimate dissent, what if the ANC leaders had tried to harmonise and genuinely implement the agendas of poverty-eradication and environment?
- Instead of promoting water commercialisation and large dams, what if South Africa had helped to establish sound principles of decommodification and respect for nature, both in water catchments at home and in international talk-shops?

Conclusion: Bottom-up, Not Top-down

Mbeki's agenda is not that of the majority of Africans or South Africans. If Johannesburg corporations profit from NEPAD's legitimisation of neoliberalism and lubrication of capital flows out of African countries, these flows mainly end up in London, where Anglo American Corporation, De Beers, Old Mutual insurance, South African Breweries and others of South Africa's largest firms re-listed their financial headquarters during the late 1990s. And if Mbeki and his colleagues are themselves benefiting from the high profile provided by NEPAD and a variety of other global-managerial functions, the real winners are those in Washington and other imperial centres that, increasingly, require a sub-imperial South African government for the ongoing superexploitation and militarisation of Africa.

But NEPAD's core content is opposed in a myriad of ways, and alternatives are being sought in the course of social justice struggles. For example, in 2004, activists in the Africa Trade Network soundly rejected the liberalisation agenda, especially Economic Partnership Agreements between Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) countries and the European Union.

On financial matters, African resistance movements also regularly voice anger. One striking example was the February 2004

stayaway called by the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, in which half a million workers rejected a civil service wage freeze promoted by the IMF, demanding instead a minimum wage and other budgetary concessions.

More generally, a June 2004 Cape Town meeting of Jubilee Africa members worked on a comprehensive Illegitimate Debt Audit. They 'expressed deep concern with South Africa's sub-imperialist role and its use of NEPAD to promote the neoliberal paradigm to further dominate the rest of the African continent politically, economically, culturally and militarily, serving the interests of transnational corporations'.

Not only do the progressive, grassroots forces oppose NEPAD, they also openly call for their finance ministers to default on the illegitimate foreign debt. They advocate not only ending the role of the World Bank and IMF in their countries, but also support international strategies for defunding and abolishing the Bretton Woods Institutions. US groups like Centre for Economic Justice and Global Exchange work with Jubilee South Africa and Brazil's Movement of the Landless, among others, to promote the 'World Bank Bonds Boycott'.

Other examples of Africans leading what is being termed 'deglobalisation' include the successful efforts to deny Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights status to AIDS medicines; to keep genetically modified organisms out of several Southern African agricultural markets; and to terminate municipal contracts with French and British water privatisers. To these ends, the African Trade Network and the Gender and Trade Network in Africa put intense pressure on the continent's delegates to reject the WTO's Cancun proposals, especially the General Agreement on Trade in Services. And with the US and EU offering no concessions on matters of great importance to Africa, upcoming bilateral or regional trade deals

are also resisted by both civil society groups and African governments.

On a more local level, inspiring examples of what might be termed 'decommodification' are under way in Africa, especially South Africa. There, independent left movements have struggled to turn basic needs into human rights: widespread access to anti-retroviral medicines to fight AIDS and other health services; free lifeline water (50 litres per person per day) and electricity (1 kilowatt hour per person per day); thorough-going land reform; prohibitions on services disconnections and evictions; free education; and even a 'Basic Income Grant,' as advocated by churches and trade unions. The idea is that all such services should be provided to all as a human right, and to the degree that it is feasible, financed through imposition of much higher prices for luxury consumption. This agenda would include generous social policies stressing decommodification, and ultimately requires capital controls and more inward-oriented industrial strategies that would permit democratic control of finance and ultimately of production itself.

These sorts of reforms would strengthen democratic movements and directly empower the producers, especially women. But as the movements advocating social change of this sort emerge, they will continue to find NEPAD's authors standing in their way. What remains to be seen is whether NEPAD itself will become a barrier, or whether its failure is already terminal.

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Endnotes

¹ For more, see www.nepad.org

² Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa and Third World Network – Africa 2002, 'Declaration on Africa's Development Challenges,' adopted at a joint conference on 'Africa's Development Challenges in the Millennium', Accra, 23-26 April.

³ South African Press Association 2003, 'Mandela Criticises Apartheid Lawsuits', 25 August.

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