Globalization and Africa's Future: Towards Structural Stability, Integration and Sustainable Development

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Introduction

As we begin a new millennium, the African continent remains marginal to almost all the major global trends. Particularly during the last three decades, the share of African countries in the global distribution of wealth and power has shrunk almost irretrievably. Whatever aspect one considers—security, foreign investment, aid, trade, the information revolution, and skilled labour force—Africa's prospects give little cause for jubilation. While the dynamics of intense economic competition, technological advancement and economic integration were underway in much of the world in the past two decades, Africa's economies and polities experienced one crisis after another. Not surprisingly, the short- and medium-term prospects for most African countries and peoples are depressing, while the challenges to be faced in order to survive are equally daunting. It has come increasingly clear to most analysts and policy makers across the continent that in order to arrest and reverse the scourge of marginalization and exclusion, Africans have to embrace fully the strategy of cooperation and integration as the primum mobile for sustainable social and economic development. The recently adopted Abuja Treaty on African Economic Cooperation and Integration as well as the Sirte Declaration on African Political Union speak eloquently to the urgency of this development strategy.

Moreover, the on-going processes of globalization, regionalization and liberalization are posing entirely new sets of complex challenges to the politically unstable, debt-ridden, aid-dependent, and technologically backward African national economies. The individual country's capacity to function effectively and sustainably is becoming increasingly compromised. Particularly since the late 1970s, the social and economic conditions on the continent have been widely rated as the most deplorable in the world. This has been unambiguously reflected in weak growth in productive sectors, poor export performance, mounting debt, deterioration in social conditions, environmental degradation, and increasing decay in the institutional capacity. Of the forty-seven countries classified by the United Nations as the least developed, no less than thirty-two are found in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1992, the UN General Assembly added Zambia, former Zaire, and Madagascar to the list of the least developed countries. Botswana and Mauritius were the first two African countries to graduate from this club of the
destitute (Harsh, 1992). Even more telling, the incidence and depth of poverty have been on the rise since the 1970s. It was estimated that about fifty per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's population live in abject poverty. The World Bank (1993) predicted in the early 1990s that given the continent's exceptionally high population growth rates-over 3 per cent a year- and low economic growth rates, as many as 100 million more Africans could be living in poverty at the turn of the twenty-first century. Reflecting on this gloomy scenario, the 1997 Human Development Report concluded, "... in a global economy of $25 trillion, this is a scandal-reflecting shameful inequalities and inexcusable failure of national and international policies" (UNDP, 1997: 2).

With the end of the cold war, and the inauguration of the "New World Order" in 1991 by the then US President George Bush, Africa enters the twenty-first century marginalized from the world economy yet highly dependent on it. Looking further ahead, Africa may expect to face a diplomatic and political deflation, potentially as great as its economic marginalization. Now that the Russian strategic and ideological interests in Africa have declined, the West can also afford to reduce its interests. Evidently, this is already occurring on a daily basis. The European Union (EU), Africa's former colonial masters and close cold war allies has markedly shifted its development cooperation priorities away from the continent. This is reflected largely in the recently concluded ACP-EU Partnership Agreement in which the EU is seeking to replace non-reciprocity trade with reciprocity trade arrangements. The apparent economic failure of sub-Saharan African economies in the 1980s and 1990s led to a climate of doubt and "afro-pessimism" regarding the prospects of Euro-African relations. In recent years, the EU has come to demonstrate increasing interest in the neighbouring countries of the Mediterranean region as well as in growth areas of South America, notably the Southern Cone Common Market (Mercosur). Compared to African countries, the Mediterranean region seems to have greater economic potential and greater political significance, not least because of EU fears of immigration from the region and the spread of religious fundamentalism. In all these political and economic configurations, Africa has fallen to the bottom of the global development agenda.

Above all, Africa has lost key advocates for the South's causes in major international organizations, particularly in the UN. The former Soviet Union and other East European socialists were often allies of Africa in world affairs. On most issues of concern to Africa, members of the old Warsaw Pact could be relied on to vote with those forces in Africa that were eager for change. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, have produced an Eastern Europe far more likely to listen to the wishes of Washington than the yearnings of the Third World, Africa included. As will be argued in subsequent pages, with the conclusion of the cold war and the end of ideological conflicts, Africa is becoming geo-politically and economically irrelevant to the major Western powers and other important global actors. It is little wonder then that the West's gradual loss of any real interest in the continent in the coming years and decades seems almost inevitable.
What are the implications of the New World Order for Africa? Does the end of the cold war imply that there will be a peace dividend for the world at large, let alone Africa? How can the reality of the continent's appalling circumstances and the growing sense of despair be turned into hope and opportunity? How can African political economies, singly and collectively, position themselves strategically to salvation, what kinds of cooperation and integration arrangements are likely to secure her economic and political emancipation in the emerging global economy? What sorts of internal restructuring are needed to empower the region to take advantage of the current and future changes in the global order? What framework of rules and institutions should be put in place to preserve the advantages of global markets and competition while ensuring that globalization works for people and not just for profits? These and similar questions structure the arguments of this paper. It is divided into four sections. Section One provides a brief introduction to the framework of explanation used. Section Two presents a background for Africa's political economy. This is followed in section Three by a review of the on-going debates on globalization and liberalization, and on the nature and role of Africa's participation in the emerging global political economy. In Section Four, three possible development scenarios for Africa are envisaged and discussed. A case for regional cooperation and integration is made in this scenario. It is argued that recent developments in the global economy have transformed the importance of African cooperation and integration strategy from a regional necessity into a continental imperative. The current crisis in Africa demonstrates the illusion, and indeed, the impossibility of independent national development strategies. It is argued that a collective structural transformation is central to Africa's survival. The last section is the conclusion.

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