What Went Wrong in Africa?

By: VAN DER VEEN Roel
In: Development Issues, Vol. 5, N° 3
Publication: December 2003
The full article document has 4-5 pages

In the last 50 years, despite rapid population growth, a reasonable standard of living has come within reach of most people. The percentage of poor has fallen to around 20% of the still expanding global population. In recent decades, people everywhere, on all continents, have seen their living standards improve. Except in Africa. The percentage of poor in Africa has risen, not fallen. The people of almost all African countries (or more specifically those of Sub-Saharan Africa) now earn on average less than at the time of Independence. Bad governance, violence, corruption and AIDS complete this sombre picture.

How could things have gone so badly wrong in Africa? Other continents have sometimes faced enormous problems, but only Africa has made almost no progress at all. The failure of development in Africa has come as a surprise to many people. Around 1960, when many countries gained Independence, there was a general feeling of euphoria, a new start for a continent that had freed itself from many years of colonial oppression and from the slave trade. At first sight, Africa didn’t seem to be in a worse position than the other non-Western continents of Asia and Latin America, which together used to be called the 'Third World'.

The virtual disappearance of the Third World as a concept is an indication that general theories about rich and poor cannot explain the realities of the situation in any detail. These explanations - first in the form of the dependency theories and more recently remoulded by the antiglobalists - claim that the poverty of poor countries is caused (or at least maintained) by the rich countries. 'The rich' are seen to have 'the poor' in an iron grip. Reality has shown, however, that this is an exaggeration, to say the least. Some poor countries, especially in East and Southeast Asia, have developed very successfully. Clearly, the obstructing influence of the international system must not be overestimated.

NON-FUNCTIONING STATES

If Africa is the only continent to lag behind, then there must be something about Africa itself that is standing in the way of development. Since the 1980s, there has been a school of thought which lays the emphasis on the state. I agree with those who see the functioning - or rather, the non-functioning - of states in Africa as a core problem. These states were left behind by the colonial powers and had to survive in an African environment. Power came to rest in the hands of a small, Western-educated elite. These people had close contacts with the departing colonial powers, but to keep their position in their own countries they had to forge new contacts with their own people. In Africa there is only one way to do that: by establishing a patron-client relationship with the population. The patron (who has power and resources to dispose of at will) builds up a network of contacts with the clients (who in return offer political support, or at least do not make life difficult for the patron).

But what could those in power give their clients in the form of favours to keep them satisfied? They had no economic resources of their own. All they 'owned' was the state and everything that was a part of it. 50 they could hand out public jobs, a wonderful gift
where poverty reigned and there was little work. After Independence, bureaucracies immediately began to expand. Furthermore public money could be used to set up industries, which also provided many jobs. In the jargon of the Cold War, this was known as the 'socialist' road to development. In practice, however, there was no 'road to development, it was simply a premodern form of redistribution by the state. In addition, in Africa, power was often seen as all-embracing and unrestricted, not limited to a certain field of activity, such as politics or the economy. First, politics would be dominated by a single party. The party then became synonymous with the state, and the one-party state swallowed up the economy. The 'chief patron' - the president - controlled everything. There was no distinction between the public and the private.

Despite forging these networks of patronage, the civil elite continued to be in a weak position. Almost everywhere, to consolidate their position, they had to work together with the military. In exchange for their services, the military always received - or appropriated - a part of the state's income. In some countries, civilians remained in power, with the support of the military, in others the military pushed the civilian government aside and set up a military dictatorship. This meant not only that development no longer had priority, but also a new form of compact between leaders and people: 'benign' patronage was gradually replaced by 'malignant' repression.

**STATUS QUO**

But no matter which method - patronage or repression - dominated, development was not achieved. The system was not focused on growth, which was necessary for higher production and consumption, but on preservation of the existing power structure, the status quo. Africa was still in essence a premodern society, which gave little prominence to the economic principles of making a profit. Resources were not deployed in the name of progress, but to preserve domestic stability. Africa's competitive power therefore remained inadequate. But while African economy and society more or less stagnated, competitive power elsewhere - where in the world increased. Globalisation, with its emphasis on effectiveness and competition, became increasingly important. As the global economy grew rapidly, Africa's share in it declined. The continent was marginalised and the incomes of its states fell.

With a rapidly expanding population, it became increasingly difficult for African leaders to find sufficient resources to preserve the patron-client relationship. From the 1970s on, they were able to preserve stability by taking out international loans. The borrowed money was, for the most part, not invested profitably, but used to feed the networks of patronage. Repayment was therefore out of the question, which made the money-lenders, united in the IMF and the World Bank, increasingly critical. In the 1980s they were only prepared to extend new loans if the African states put their finances back in order. With incomes down, this meant reducing their expenditure. Because a relatively large share of African government spending goes on civil service salaries, the cutbacks could be achieved only by widespread redundancies in the public sector. Services like education and health were hit hard, with the result that support for government quickly crumbled.

In the 1990s, African leaders had little choice than to invest their increasingly scarce resources in groups who were most loyal to them. In most cases, this was their own ethnic group. Members of rival ethnic groups were often disadvantaged, which naturally, led to dissatisfaction and tensions. Ethnic loyalties gained ground at the expense of nationalist sentiments, leading to further fragmentation of the central state. Mostly, all that was left was a hardcore of leaders and their most faithful clients, who held each other in a
stranglehold, neither being able to survive without the other. This core had to compete with other cores which emerged, usually on an ethnic basis. In countries with easy to exploit raw materials (such as diamonds), the tensions soon led to violence and conflict. The government no longer stood above the conflict, preserving law and order, but became increasingly one of the warring parties. This signified the end of the state as an effective institution in society. The fate of these failed states can be seen in many parts of Africa, from Somalia to Congo and Liberia.

DEMOCRATISATION

When the Cold War ended, the dissatisfaction of the people in African countries came to the surface. This dissatisfaction was expressed in a wave of democratisation. Many groups demanded a change of policy, new faces in the government and greater control over those in power. Elections were held across the continent, some of which led to peaceful changes of government. The pressure came at a time when many authoritarian regimes in Africa were already feeling the pinch, due to the changed international situation. Africa had lost its strategic importance. For the international powers, it was no longer necessary for African leaders to stay in power. In this new situation, they had to try and save themselves.

In addition, the international community gave increasing support to democratisation in African states. A variety of measures were taken to improve the functioning of the state, such as strengthening governance capacity, combating corruption, promoting the rule of law and supporting civil society organisations. All of these factors combined to generate a force - from both within African societies and from the international community - for renewal of the state. This push towards rebuilding the state aimed to counteract the process of state disintegration. The outcome of the current struggle between state disintegration and state-building will determine the future of African countries and regions. For the moment, disintegration seems to have the upper hand, especially in West and Central Africa. For the rest of Africa continued stagnation would seem the best we can hope for. For Africa, the near future looks anything but optimistic.

Descriptors: Poverty, Corruption, Conflicts, Development Policy, Democratisation

Contact: Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hagues,
The Netherlands
Tel.: (31) (0) 70 4260 443 or 4260 419
Fax: (31)(0) 70 4260 799
Email: DevlSSues@iss.nl