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# Robust Societies – Weak States: A new perspective on the so-called "failure" of African institutions

by Andrea M. Lang

Comments on African governments by political scientists, development specialists or representatives of Western governments are predominantly negative. The states are described as "weak", "failing" or "stuck in transition". The governments lack in democracy, they are not responsible, they show poor performances and some of them are openly corrupt which leads some commentators to talk about cleptocracy (Bayart et al. 1999) or pirate states (Davidson 1992). As remedies the donors try to implement programmes of "Good Governance".
What I will do in this paper is to try and provide a different view on the apparent failures of African states and societies.[i] Rather than to criticize and bemoan the apparent "bad work" of African governments and the seemingly irresponsible behaviour of African people I will argue that these are the result of a different attitude towards the organisation of society and will characterise this form of social order as "robust" in contrast to the Western "complex" society.

**Examples for the persistence of "robust systems" in modern South Africa**

Before I start with a definition of a robust society I would like to recount 3 incidences where those involved are not behaving in the ways as we, from a Western point of view, would expect them to act.

- The first example is an incident that happened in August 1999 when a petrol plant started to burn in Idutywa, a small town in former Transkei. In accordance with emergency plans the local fire brigade set off an alarm to the larger fire units in nearby towns which all did arrive, except the one based in Umtata, a town about 80 km away

also in the former homeland Transkei. There was no reply why they did not turn up. Later on they claimed that their trucks had run out of petrol. (Daily Dispatch: 1999:08:03)

- The second example is again located in Transkei. It is the story of a 9-year-old girl who was abducted in the Cape in 1997 and brought to the Transkei where she was basically held like a slave and maltreated by her kidnappers. In 1999 a villager, Cynthia Ndukumbini, working in Cape Town visits the village. She soon finds out that the child does not belong there and decides to inform the police who first are reluctant to open a case and also remain inactive after Cynthia returns to Cape Town. Cynthia, who cannot forget the unhappy little girl, then informs some journalists working for the Cape Argus who initiate a rescue mission with several journalists driving to Transkei "scouring the hills" and finally tracking the little girl. The villagers now appear reluctant to let the girl go and insist the police should inform. But after the authorities had failed the girl the first time the journalists decide to take her to Port Alfred where she is fed and receives clothes. The next day she is returned to her family living in the Karoo who is overjoyed by her return. Her abuser now faces charges for kidnapping. (Daily Dispatch: 1999:07:17)
- The last example is not a single case study but an everyday occurrence according to women support groups in South Africa. When a woman who has been severely abused by her husband calls the police, they will first of all act in a sympathetic way and take the abuser with them. When, after having gone for advice to a support group, the victim will try to go to court, she will find that the dockets have "disappeared" or in many cases have been sold to the family of the abuser so that he cannot be brought to court.

As diverse as these examples are they have in common that from a Western viewpoint it is quite clear what would have been the right thing to do which can be summarized as to accept responsibilities:

a. in the case of the fire brigade to fulfil their commitment according to the emergency plans
b. in the case of the slave girl
    i. for the villagers who must have seen that something terrible is happening to inquire and to inform the authorities
    ii. for the police to start acting immediately as soon as they learn about the instance

c. in the case of the abuse for the police and court officials to act according to the prescribed rules.

The interesting question in all those incidents is why officials (and villagers in the second example) act so irresponsibly and the normal reactions of people of Western origin tend to range from educational ("they need better training") to more or less racist ("typically African").[1]

All those incidents happened in 1999 during the time when I was conducting research in South Africa about traditional leaders for my PhD (Lang 2004) and an interesting experience was that the further I went with my research on traditional leaders and their authorities, the more I began to grasp the reasons and the worldview behind these actions and could see parallels to what my interview partners told me. In our discussions I encountered a situation where, when we talked about social problems within the societies on a more general level, the traditional leaders would be very rational, they would criticise the events and in many cases, where the traditional leader saw himself as responsible for the well-being of the community, they had developed certain strategies to cope with the problem and even some procedures for it. But the moment I asked about concrete cases it became difficult as they expressed an inability to act unless those concerned agreed to have them involved or to say it in the words of a traditional leader "*We don't walk around the village looking for trouble – they must come to me and I will deal with it"*. This of course is a totally different approach from our Western view on authority, where for example the patrolling of the city by police and their immediate action in case of transgressions of the laws of the country is beyond criticism. So what I am going to do today is to try and reconstruct the views on society hidden behind these kinds of behaviour and to show that they are neither irrational nor irresponsible but based on a different perception of social organisation and the location of competences.

Since the completion of my PhD I am now in the process of formulating an alternative form of societal order where this kind of behaviour first makes sense and second serves the purpose of creating security. At a later stage this will also raise the question what impact this different understanding on society will have on cooperations with Africa.

What I am presenting today are some thoughts about concept of a societal model that I try to characterize as "robust". Of course, if we look at societies today, we will not be able to trace a pure type of "robust" societies, neither will it ever have existed, esp. as the entire concept is based on the idea of creating security by preserving flexibility and an ongoing process of outbalancing and negotiations. Even in the examples given at the beginning, where I think some

[1] A thorough account of the incomprehension and frustration can be found in Lamb 1989.

aspects of robust societies can easily be traced, we will find that ideas of localising competences and joint responsibilities either mix or are at least contested. The fact that officials come up with poor excuses shows that they are not all that certain about the correctness of their behaviour. But for the sake of clarity I will describe an ideal type of robust society rather than the negotiated compromise or a hybrid.

**Robust Social Systems**

"Robust" in everyday use of language is often a mixed praise. On the one hand it is an acknowledgement of being able to cope with most of the challenges and to easily adjust to situations. On the other hand it clearly also indicates a lack of sophistication and elegance thus placing it strongly in a more "natural" than classy environment.

Originally, robust describes strength and force. It stems from the Latin "*robustus"* that describes something fabricated from oak or other hardwood. In general it today portrays a solid character or nature partly resilient against outside influences and interventions as well as able to quickly recover from misfortunes. This rather biological and agricultural term has lately been adopted in the computer science where it describes an attitude that computer specialists in their own slang describe as "*Paranoia"* meaning never to trust anything that they haven't generated themselves. Instead of being confident that the user is intelligent they always presuppose his "*Stupidity*", which makes it necessary to keep things as simple and self-explanatory as possible. Also single application failures should not lead to a breakdown and the program should come with a range of capabilities rather than relying on the work of other specialists. So it basically stands for a program that minimizes reliance on other programs, is sceptical about dependency, tries to keep things as simple as possible and always presupposes that mistakes or (in computer language) "bugs" happen but also that their impact should be limited.[2]

I am applying this approach of creating "robustness" and the philosophy behind to characterize a form of society that is based on the principle that the responsibilities for solving problems and for defining ways of doing things, is located with those who are most directly concerned by them. It is up to them to recognise that there is a problem, to think about ways of solving it and, if it is not possible to find a solution, to involve others on a temporary basis (such as in my field study to ask the traditional leader to intervene) whilst they still remain responsible for the process themselves. This outside intervention is preferably short-termed and once the crisis is resolved the authorities will withdraw their interest and keep their distance.

[2] Webopedia http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/R/robust.html: 13.2.2007

So rather than building institutions likely to cope with all disruptions as it is the strategy of Western culture, African social systems have taken the path of minimizing the effects of disruptions or crisis by developing a social system that firmly locates primary responsibilities for all kind of matters at the most local level. Ideally the person him-/herself should be in a position to find solutions if necessary by making use of networks which allows them to still be able to control procedures.[3] The persons concerned may employ alternative forms of social networks if one institution fails. The importance of different networks for meeting primary needs may alter profoundly during lifetime, but nevertheless the desire to keep things within one's own influence remains a key element. The desire "to be respected by others" was also strongly emphasised by many interview partners. It is only when these local attempts don't succeed that they will now seek help from people who are not directly involved or from authorities.

By being able to remain masters of one's own affairs in combination with flexible networks that allow its members to join and quit in combination with an ongoing process to form new social groups according to one's present needs opens up opportunities for gaining security without really increasing dependency on a single institution able to either fulfil or fail the applicant's aspirations. On the other hand this very localised and self-sustaining form of building networks might also prove to be less vulnerable to outside interventions or disasters as the low scale of formalization allows for easy regroupings or reassembling but also for the replacement of failed social networks for new ones.

In consequence this means that societies encompass the element of disruption and destruction but try to safeguard themselves from its consequences by localising decisions, which means that smaller groups might find is easier to reconfigurate and to recreate order. It also means that the organisation is less formalized than in the Western model of governments where bureaucracies or social complexity evolved over a long span of time.

**Authorities in Robust Societies**

This is not to say that robust societies are egalitarian. Authorities do exist and are respected by the population despite the fact that they have less influence than their Western counterparts. In fact even their position is negotiated and people will offer or withdraw their support to alter decisions or to voice their consent or anger. As the position of the leader is less formalized and his real competences and sphere of influence are flexible, these negotiations take place on a more or less regular basis.

[3] See for example the court cases described by Roberts & Comaroff 1981

The desire to keep competences within the individual's own sphere of influences in robust societies also requires different forms of checks and balances. Whereas in the Western democracies institutionalised forms of control by elections, the separation of powers, and the principle that all acts of administration and control are bound by laws have evolved and an interest in politics is seen as a prerogative of a working state, the aim in a robust society with localised competences is not to control the conduct of the different powers but to keep decision-making at the most local level and thus be able to refuse or offer support[4] for the officials. The bypassing of state institutions should therefore not be misunderstood as opposition that can be overcome by establishing more participatory or democratic institutions, rather it is an expression of the people's attempts to rely on structures they can directly control and to remain flexible.

This attitude can easily be traced in the meetings of so-called traditional structures. Negotiations about who holds the primary responsibility over certain subjects dominates most of the discussions within traditional councils rather than an actual dealing with the application itself. For those sitting together this means always to find a compromise between the need to somehow act together while at the same time to firmly relocate and resituate the primary responsibilities to the most local level.

On the other hand, the high degree of independence of social groups allows them to use their support for the traditional leader or its withdrawal to control or encourage the community's leader. This may even lead to the paradox that a well-performing traditional leader might be faced with blockades from within his council where the representatives of families and other social groups try to safeguard their sphere of influence against a development-orientated takeover. In contrast, a traditional leader who is considered weak and failing even by his own council, might find the elderly men quite supportive up to the extent that they sometimes seem to take over responsibilities and run the council.

The same illogicality in our understanding can be found in other situations as well: In the ratio of preserving a robust social order any attempts of taking over responsibilities will in consequence limit the competences of the more local spheres so that we might find situation where a "corrupt" leader who is concerned in his or his own networks interests only might be more easily dealt with as he is no threat to the local, self-sufficient networks than someone who is

[4] This form of negotiating by either engaging or disengaging between government and ethnic leaders has been described by Chazan (1988), but the same phenomenon can also be found on more local levels down to the family where family members support or the withholding of information was described as a means of influencing the elderly gentlemen's representation of the family at councils and towards the traditional leader by my informants. In fact, many traditional leaders mentioned the ongoing supply of the elders with information as an important contribution and the withdrawal or re-channelling of information via other networks as a means of sanctioning him for not passing on information or following his own interests only.

trying to establish institutions and to bind people in fixed forms of societal organisation. This perhaps also explains why local people find a way round to arrange themselves with corrupt officials who meet their expectations rather than with bureaucrats who act strictly according to the regulations.

**Encounters**

The interesting question now is what happens if both cultures meet, and I think these experiences may be summarized in one word: Frustrations. The fact that there is no common agreement about the degree joint ventures should be institutionalised and what other tasks they should fulfil apart from the initial idea of its establishment severely hampers the cooperation. Whereas in the African context flexibility of arrangement and sufficient space for other solutions are desirable, for their Western counterparts the best thing to do is to develop a reliable and sufficient structure. Whereas Africans prefer short time engagement of authorities and an immediate withdrawal and re-establishment of capacities to those concerned, Westerners look for strong structures that can take over of responsibilities and "binding law" is seen as the preferable outcome of their campaigns.

This misconception of the location of responsibilities also leads to the development of different approaches to deal with problems. The method chosen by Western consultants to deal with many crises as for example the Aids-Pandemic or the high rape rate in Southern Africa is to look for authorities who should be sensitised and who should now be responsible for advocating a change in behaviour. If their attempts fail, they should inform the authorities and get them involved. In reality, even if they would be prepared to become active, the decision on how to behave and the exertion of control is none of their business. The only ones who decide about these issues are those most directly concerned, but to thrust the responsibilities for their own well-being onto ordinary people and the "weakest members of society" as for example youth and children runs counter to any common sense in Western thought. In the logic of robust societies it might be the only effective measure to take. (Lang 2007)

In reality this is not understood. Instead we are confronted with an ongoing search for structures onto which one may vest responsibilities that also often leads to a overburdening of otherwise successful projects which are seen as a vehicle to "workshop" people not only to fulfil the initial goals of the project but also other tasks such as "education on democracy, project planning, good governance, women's rights" etc. Authorities who decline to act in "responsible manner" are accused of failure and corruption. Nevertheless as people give it preference over the Western model of relying on strong institutions and of shared responsibilities it must

hold some advantages over the Western model or at least suit the environment better than ours and we should in a way respect this rather than fight against it.

**Analysing the initial cases against the background of a robust society**

I am now trying to demonstrate how the initial case studies look like if we take on a different perspective. In the first example the fire brigade in Idutywa holds the primary responsibility for acting and should not call for assistance unless they had at least tried to extinguish the fire. In the third example it is of course possible for an authority to intervene once a crisis occurs. But when family members approach the official and ask for the dockets, they clearly indicate that the family will now take over and respect for the local level demands to return the responsibility for dealing with it to them. That they "pay" or "reward" the official restores a balanced relationship, the police has done something for the family and has to be compensated for its efforts, so that mutual respect and the autonomy of the family to sort out its own problems is restored.

The second case also shows the disadvantages of waiting for the groups who are most concerned to start acting: As the girl's family does not know the whereabouts of their child, they cannot enter negotiations about her return. The kidnappers are of course not likely to alter their position and the little girl is too small to initiate an escape on her own. As the other local people including the police do not see her desperate condition as "their concerns", the situation remains unchanged for 2 years up until a warm-hearted outsider decides that something has to be done and even takes it upon herself to organise a rescue committee once the authorities fail her.

**Conclusion**

Western complex social systems and African robust systems differ profoundly. Whereas the former feel safe when more encompassing social structures take on issues and define and guarantee certain norms, the latter is based on an idea of self-reliance and mistrust towards institutions. Robust social systems and Western systems differ concerning the relationship between the population and those in government and the tasks governments should fulfil and the relationship between state and citizens:

1.) It is much more distanced than in Western states and there is a strong desire on all sides to keep the other at bay: The government will not take over responsibilities where they should do so. But also the people will actively contradict all attempts by government to extent its sphere of influence. This situation poses a dilemma for state officials who operate at the interface between the state and the population who are re-

quired to fulfil certain administrative tasks in a most unsupportive environment: neither officials in higher ranks nor the population shows much regard in their performance which will either result in a poor quality and a preparedness to misuse office or to a meticulous writing down of facts and information out of context and a general impression that the official has not really understood the importance and sense of his acting.

2.) Checks and balances within the system also differ profoundly from the Western system. Whereas Western political systems combine a horizontal system of checks and balances consisting of executive, legislative and judicative powers with periodical elections, African systems use vertical checks and balances. Negotiations will be held on whether the strong subsidiarian spaces organised along kinship or common interest lines will support the government and allow an interference in matters and concerns that effect their interests or whether they will block the initiative either by withdrawing support or by openly giving their support to alternative structures operating in the same field.

3.) There is also a shift of emphasis: Whereas for Western political thought the control and channels of participation is essential for the well-being of people the focus of African people tends towards authorities is to emphasize the need to respect their own abilities and more often than not to stay out of one's own affairs. This also can be taken from the concept of preserving the dignity of humans and the African "respect". Whereas the former sees it as a task of society to provide for its inhabitants the African "respect" is much more directed against unwanted interventions from outside.

Robust systems hold a great potential for adjustments and the production of diversified social subsystems. In case one system fails either by being less reliable or because it fails completely other social systems can theoretically step in as all of them hold a low level of specialisation or institutionalisation. On the other hand, potential involvement also is weighed up to effort and gains. To just take over responsibility "because someone has to do it" or with an appeal to some collective ideals would clearly stand against the idea of robust systems and self-reliance which also pre-supposes that people should find own solutions for own problems. And in many cases they will.

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Comaroff, John L.; Roberts, Simon A. (1981): Rules and Processes - The Cultural Logic of Dispute in an African Context; Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
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Lang, Andrea Marianne (2007): Rechtsvakuum durch konkurrierende Verfahrenserwartungen: Die Unerreichbarkeit Traditionaler und staatlicher Institutionen in Fällen sexuellen Missbrauchs von Mädchen in den ländlichen Gebieten Südafrikas. In: Zeitschrift für Ethnologie; Band 132, [forthcoming]

[i] The project of developing the concept of robust social systems is still in its initial stage. The paper should therefore be taken as a first rather than a final account of the concept.