HOW DO AFRICA'S NEW ENGAGEMENTS AFFECT GOVERNANCE?

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50 years after the initial independence wave and 20 years after governance became a buzzword in Africa, there are clear signs that the basis of politics on the continent is changing. It is not uniformly in a single direction, e.g. toward liberal democracy, but there is a confluence of factors that leads us to ask the question if Africa is – at long last – being untamed. This word is being intentionally used here to indicate a rise in new forms of social and political consciousness that are likely to determine developments in the years to come. "Untamed" is also being used in contrast to "liberated". Liberation suggest struggle, often heroic, and was associated in Africa with gaining political independence. Un-taming refers to a more subtle process whereby countries, through collective action, take advantage of opportunities that come with the continent's growing integration into the global economy. To be sure, this integration is not uncontroversial, but it is much more complex than the suggestion by doomsday prophets that globalization inevitably leads to Africa's further marginalization. This becomes especially obvious when examining the issue not merely in terms of global statistics but also longer term processes behind the figures.

Official global statistics may at best only give a hint at it, but Africa is at a crossroads where several important albeit difficult choices have to be made in order to move forward. With China leading the pack, the global investment community is not only putting more capital into the continent for profit but also for development. The relationship is becoming increasingly symbiotic, as the outside world is beginning to take the continent seriously. The perception of Africa is changing and the Soccer World Cup in South Africa definitely helped to open the eyes of many. This does not mean that everything is going to change overnight. Capital markets are shallow, information hard to come by, infrastructure often inadequate and the continent remains divided into many small markets. The key to unlocking Africa's potential lies in a deeper knowledge of the local realities, notably the rise of a new middle class with ambitions beyond living off rents.

The research community can help highlight these issues and contribute to a better understanding of the stakes at hand for African countries as they enter the global stage in a more engaging manner. This paper addresses some of the most important issues that are associated with the un-taming of the countries on the continent: (1) a shift in problem definition, (2) a renewed focus on development, (3) accelerating the growth of a middle class, (4) seizing new opportunities, (5) learning from peers rather than masters, and (6) making governance a learning lesson rather than a teaching session.

Shift in perception and problem definition

Public policies in African countries have for the past two decades been largely guided by the perception of the international donor community about what is wrong with the continent. The weaknesses that have dominated this perception are poverty and lack of good governance. While these issues are still around, there is sense that African is no longer a continent just to pity but one with prospects for progress on its own. This shift is beginning to take root even in donor circles as well as in Africa.

As principal funders of government capital (development) budgets in many African countries, the OECD donor countries have set the agenda for both governance and development. This way, the problems facing these countries have been identified by external actors with typically little input from national governments. Consultants have helped lay the groundwork for specific policy interventions but they have refined rather than questioned the initial perceptions of their principals. In pursuing the objectives of poverty reduction and good governance as matters of faith, the OECD countries have not only limited the scope of funding to specific sectors but also confined the discourse on what needs to be done to issues that are not perceived in the same way and with the same degree of priority by recipient governments.

The donors have pursued their role as agenda-setters at both international and national level. They have actively used the United Nations as a forum for gaining legitimacy for their policy claims. The Millenium Development Goals is the most ambitious and comprehensive of these claims to setting the global agenda. It has been especially controversial because of its 15-year deadline which has prompted donors and recipients alike to rush support for policy interventions, especially in the social sector, that are leaving most recipient governments in Africa with a recurrent cost burden that they cannot afford to carry (Therkildsen and Buhr 2010). Another controversial aspect of the MDGs has been its insistence on the same set of priorities for all regions of the world regardless of circumstances, capacity or demand.

At national level, donors have typically acted in unison with the excuse that they wish to avoid duplication or undue competition. This is understandable from a donor administrative perspective, but it serves to limit the opportunities recipient institutions have in influencing the problem definition. Donors organize into consortia for larger-scale sector support that often turn into cartel-like bodies arguing their case as condition for signing any official aid agreement.

There are differences between the ways these governments have responded to this submission to what is perceived largely as an alien agenda. Some, like Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, have outright rejected it or actively sabotaged it. Others have taken a meeker position and officially accepted the agenda but done little more than what is minimally required in the eyes of the donors to implement it. These governments have shown little interest in challenging the perceptions of the donor community because they have been afraid of losing the support on which they so extensively have been relying on. The OECD donor arm has been quite effective in taming most African governments.

To be fair, the donor community has realized that this hegemonic position has its costs in terms of aid effectiveness. It began with studies aimed at getting a better understanding of why so many policies in African countries lack political traction, i.e. not getting acted upon as intended by the funders. Examples included the "drivers of change" analysis developed by the British DFID and "power" analysis by Swedish Sida. Other donor agencies developed their own versions along the same lines (Dahl-Ostergaard et al 2005). A joint effort to give more political space to recipient government institutions followed in the form of the 2005 Paris Declaration that emphasized the need for mutual accountability in order to make aid more effective. Specific steps such as harmonizing aid to limit the administrative burden on recipient institutions, enhancing national ownership, and building more inclusive partnerships became part of the new global agenda that was subsequently reaffirmed and developed through the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008.

The Paris Agenda is a very ambitious one. It has not proved easy to put into practice although many, if not all donors have tried to take it seriously. According to the first evaluation that was prepared for the Accra follow-up meeting, national ownership remains too much the prerogative of central government, donor harmonization becomes a major preoccupation, and alignment with country systems being perceived as too risky by many donors given pressures on them from home-based institutions to avoid corruption (Woods et al 2008).

The issue that still remains is how far the donor community is ready to go with regard to giving up its role as agenda setter. The Paris Declaration has started a move in the direction of giving more space to recipient institutions but in 2011 it seems the move has stalled to a large extent over how to interpret and implement the principle of mutual accountability. More and more recipient governments have come under fire by individual donor countries for misappropriating their money. These criticisms indicate that it is not easy to get out from under the pressures that the donors exercise in order to fulfill their own objectives.

A second issue is how problems have been perceived. Perceptions of what to do have to a large extent been driven by how a particular policy should be designed. Technique has come before substance. The result is that policies have typically missed the bigger and real picture. To make this clearer, it may be helpful to reiterate the components of the conventional model of policy process.

The latter can roughly be divided into five phases. The first is perceiving and defining the problem. This is followed by discussion of what courses of action to take. After that, time has come to identify which course of action is in the best interest of the decision-maker. The fourth phase is implementation and the last is evaluation for the purpose of knowing whether one is on track and how much has been achieved. It is a "rationality" project based on a market model of society. Society, in this model, consists of a collection of autonomous rational decision-makers with no constraints acting on their ability to find the best decision. Donor-funded projects have with no exception been designed along these lines. The attention of the stakeholders, therefore, has been to grasp where and how good policies get derailed.

The problem with this model, as Stone (1997) among others point out, is the narrow frame within which complex and contested problems are conceived. It overlooks that policy-making is a struggle over ideas; that solutions are often perceived before the problem is identified; and that policy instruments are not just neutral but carry specific political meanings that cannot be ignored. By focusing on things rational and actionable, donors have based their policies on variables that are perceived as possible to control and manipulate while externalizing those factors that are often the true determinants of policy outcome.

The confined sphere of the policy world in African countries due to the dominance of donors as agenda setters means that problems have been perceived through lenses that fail to excite domestic stakeholders. Their perceptions have often been totally ignored in favor of problem definitions made by external consultants and policy practitioners. Africa's growing integration into the global economy and the rise of groups of new stakeholders outside government are beginning to have the effect of allowing for a shift in perception of what needs to be done. Africa is not just broke and needs to be fixed as the premise of the donors has been over the years. Africa is also a continent of opportunity where things are possible. To sum up this emerging shift in perception, the words of a former president of Brazil, Hernando Cardoso, are pertinent. In order not to overlook the potential for improvement even in dire situations, he is quoted as emphasizing: "don't ask whether the glass is half-empty ask whether it is half-full". This phrase has since been credited to him as the "Cardoso principle".

Renewed focus on development

An especially important re-assessment that is also taking place concerns to the relationship between governance and development. For at least two decades now, the premise in the international community has been that good governance – read liberal democracy – is a precondition not only for receipt of foreign aid but also for societal development. This has given rise to a whole industry of governance assessors and advisors trying to measure as best they can the way individual countries are governed and how close they come to the liberal ideal. Since the Nordic countries have typically been at the top of the ladder, the ambition has been portrayed as ”getting to Denmark” based on the use of best practices identified as tools and approaches adopted by those that have shown the most progress (Centre for the Future of the State 2010). Getting to Denmark, however, has been misleading especially in the African context where best practices, whether borrowed from Europe, the U.S. or Asia, find limited nurturing ground.

The most serious shortcoming with this approach has been its lack of historical grounding. Democracy may grow even in poor countries as some examples from Africa, e.g. Ghana, Benin and Cape Verde, confirm. As Lindberg (2006) has shown, the holding of regular elections contributes to the institutionalization of both civil and political rights. Even in the more successful African examples, however, democracy remains very much a work in progress.

Applying the Western ideals of good governance as conditions for foreign aid and treating it as a prerequisite for development have pushed the relationship between the two too far in one direction. There is no real consensus among political scientists whether governance or development comes first, i.e. which variable explains the other (see (e.g. Lewis-Beck and Burkhart 1994, Przeworski et al 2000, and Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2005). Based on careful analysis, however, the majority view is that economic growth and development precedes democracy or good governance. Thus, it is a critical factor in ensuring the sustainability of forms of good governance.

Without implying that concerns with the quality of governance in the international donor community are wasted, it is nonetheless clear that its role in development in Africa has been overstated. As events in the Arab world have indicated, opportunities for governance reform tend to arise when there is a demand for it from domestic constituencies. Reforms that are pursued in a tutelary fashion by external actors stand a very little chance of succeeding. It is necessary, therefore, to discuss under which circumstances opportunities for governance reform may arise. Historical experience indicates that it may happen when there are social and political forces ready to challenge an incumbent regime that is weakening through controversial actions, e.g corruption or repression.

Leftist analysts in the 1970s celebrated the working people and the peasants as the driving force that could change the political regimes in Africa in a more just and equitable direction (e.g. Mamdani 1976, Gutkind and Wallerstein 1976). The problem with most of their analysis was that it was based more on ideological faith than empirical evidence. Even when evidence was produced it was marginal to the overall cause of transformation that they anticipated workers and peasants in Africa would be capable of achieving. The economic system, based as it was on a multitude of quite autonomous peasant farmers and a miniscule working class, was not congenial to the kind of change that these leftist analysts not only analyzed but also advocated. In the end, therefore, the steam ran out of this approach and those who still hung on to it in the 1980s were increasingly reduced to propagating a false revolutionary rhetoric.

The leftist analysis often included a broadside against modernization theory which had dominated the intellectual and policy discourses in the 1960s. This theory was based on the explicit premise that democracy – or good governance – was a product of social and economic conditions and thus not possible to “fast-track”. Its adherents largely ignored governance issues in favor of development because it was the latter that needed to be accelerated so that democratic regimes could arise. An especially influential text was produced by the Canadian political scientist, Seymour Martin Lipset, who based on empirical data from Europe and Latin America argued that democracy is clearly correlated with high levels of economic development (Lipset 1960). The donor approach reflected much of this thinking. For example, the Danish aid strategy adopted by the country’s parliament in 1971 stated it in these words:

> The purpose of Denmark’s national assistance to developing countries should be, through cooperation with the governments and authorities of these countries, to support their efforts to achieve economic growth and, in this way, to contribute to ensuring social progress and political independence (Bach et al. 2003).

If the donors in the past two decades have swung the pendulum too far in the direction of governance, it is evident that in the 1960s and 70s they had turned it too far in the direction of believing that development was everything. Good governance in developing countries would have to await its time until they were more like already developed societies. The most effective critique of this linear perception of development and its ability to produce positive outcomes was Samuel P. Huntington (1968) who recognized that development also has its costs. His point was that economic and social development often led to coups and revolutions because there was a gap between what newly empowered groups of people expected of their political system, on the one hand, and what the existing system allowed them to do in terms of influencing its direction, on the other. He further argued that these attacks against the existing political order were seldom driven by the poor but rather a rising middle class frustrated by the lack of political and economic opportunity. His thesis seems to apply to recent cases like Egypt and Tunisia. Most other countries on the continent do not have a rising middle class that constitutes a critical mass in the same way as in these North African countries, but the growing interest in political economy studies in the donor community is indicative of a change toward a greater recognition of development variables as determinants of governance. Progress does not come by focusing on the poor. It requires an elite ready to transform the productive forces and open to demands for improved governance. That is why the middle class is getting more attention in Africa.

Accelerating the growth of a middle class

It may be helpful to discuss who the middle class is and what its historical role has been. In defining it, there has been an argument whether to use a logical or sociological approach. The former suggests that the middle class is in-between, whether that is between very rich and poor or lord and peasant. This definition, for instance, is often used in the United States politics where the average American worker is the core of this class. They have made it out of poverty – often as new immigrants – and are now living what is referred to there as “the American Dream”. In European and Asian – and one might wish to add Latin American – circumstances, it is not so much income as history that defines its position in-between. The middle class has been defined as a group distinct from the aristocracy but also workers and peasants. The notion of “class” in these societies is not merely a statistical category but a subjective consciousness. In this respect, it is not surprising that class analysis has been a major intellectual preoccupation in Europe, Asia and Latin America while not in North America.

Attempts to define the middle class have also focused on its chief characteristics. Beyond being an income category it is being defined in terms of a particular set of attitudes. Its members think of themselves as people with more autonomy to act in their own interest because they typically have a reasonable amount of discretionary income. They don’t live from hand-to-mouth, job-to-job or season-to-season. Where exactly the line goes between those who are members of the class and those who do not yet qualify varies, but one economist suggests people with a third of their income left for discretionary spending after providing for basic food and shelter belong to the category (Farrell 2006). This allows them not only to buy fridges and cars but also improve the chances for their kids to get a good life. In countries without a welfare state protection, this may mean investments in better health care and, perhaps especially, savings for children's education.

The middle class is part of the elite but the latter is broader in scope, including influential members of society who are not necessarily enjoying the same level of discretionary spending. For instance, in many countries members of the cultural elite are not necessarily part of the middle class although they may have influence on society and thus qualify to be part of the elite. Some analysts prefer to refer to the middle class as the "bourgeoisie". This indicates that the middle class is typically urban rather than rural in origin and composition. Its members have been in the forefront of building modern society.

Its historical role was perhaps most famously analyzed by Karl Marx who, despite his socialist revolutionary thinking admired the bourgeoisie. After all, it was the latter that put an end to all feudal, patriarchal and, what he termed "idyllic" relations. Through its exploitation of the world market it gave rise to a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in society. National narrow-mindedness became increasingly difficult to pursue. What he referred to as "even the most barbarian nations" were being brought into civilization thanks to the bourgeoisie. Barrington Moore Jr (1966) followed up on this argument based on his study of how 20th Century democracies and dictatorships arose and added the important point that without the bourgeoisie there would be no democracy.

This perspective on history and how countries develop has gained renewed relevance in the light of globalization and the growing significance of emerging nations in the global economy. The middle class or bourgeoisie is by no means the answer to everything. Its role, furthermore, is sometimes controversial and contested. Both Thailand and Turkey are examples of countries where the middle class has grown rapidly in the past couple of decades but where it has also split and become a source of instability. In a longer historical perspective, however, these two countries do not tell the whole story. On the contrary, the middle class has not just been modernizing pioneers but typically also a social force for stability and moderation. It is by nature inclusive and heterogeneous. It stands for reform rather than revolution and because of its role in society it tends to be pragmatic. Even when its members have been on the barricades fighting for civil and political rights it has been in the name of universal values and principles. The wave of democratization that spread in the 1980s and 1990s in Southern Europe, Latin America and eventually in Eastern and Central Europe was led by middle class groups. The recent rebellions in the Arab world have similarly been headed by the middle class.

The role of the middle class in Africa has received much less attention than its counterpart in Asia and Latin America where globalization has made more significant inroads and the benefits from integration into the global economy have paid off in more visible ways. The middle class in most African countries is not only numerically small but it also has to cope with what is a denigrating legacy. During the first twenty to thirty years after independence the middle class was viewed – and often treated – more as a liability than an asset in development. Nationalist and socialist leaders did not like competition from independently rich individuals. They preferred state control and regulation. As a result, they built authoritarian political systems and confined the elite to being what Issa Shivji (1975) in condescending language referred to as the "bureaucratic bourgeoisie". To the extent that these countries developed a middle class or "bourgeoisie" it was in a lopsided manner restricted to the public sector. It lacked the economic and political freedom that had allowed its members in other regions of the world to set the pace for progress.

This has changed in the past two decades with more African countries becoming democratic and adopting a market economy. Being able to take advantage not only of closer interactions with Europe and America but, above all, with other regions in the South, particularly countries in Asia, a new group of more independent and liberally minded persons has emerged in most African countries. Many members of this emerging middle class are women and it is clear that they make historically speaking an earlier entry into active membership of this class than women have been able to experience in other regions of the world. Whatever their gender, however, they constitute a new social force that has the potential of changing both development and governance on the African continent by creating a more genuine demand for norms that hitherto has been fostered largely by external donors.

This middle class is still comparatively small and its ability to act in unison is sometimes hampered by ethnic divisions, as the challenges of the economically successful cases of the Ivory Coast and Kenya indicate. There are still doubts whether the middle class in multi-ethnic societies can overcome social divisions but in the longer run its contribution to political stability and peace is likely to be a key factor. In fact, it can be argued that it was the economic interests of the Kenyan middle class that saved the country from worse mayhem than the killings and displacements that took place in the wake of the disputed 2007 elections.

Seizing new opportunities

The middle class in Africa is the underestimated factor in development that can make a positive difference to governance. Despite its relatively small size, there are more middle class families in all of Africa than there are in India (Rintoul 2010) and they remain underpenetrated when it comes to telecommunications, consumer goods and financial services. External actors are only beginning to realize its potential and members of the African middle class are just in an early stage of getting to know what this potential implies.

Because the African middle class has been largely concentrated to the public sector, its members have had their eyes more on foreign aid and subsidized support for public ventures than on other opportunities. Its perspective on what can be done in developing their country has been both ideologically and politically constricted. Donor insistence that they get their market in order to lessen transaction costs and pave the way for more reliable and effective use of aid have served to reinforce this narrow perspective.

Looking back at what has happened in the last three decades, the economic reforms that were initiated under the Structural Adjustment rubric have opened African economies in ways that have also facilitated their integration into the global economy. Although African leaders almost to a man criticized the SAPs when they were first launched, they have come to appreciate them. Today, few, if any, raise their voice against economic liberalization. To the extent that African leaders raise a voice of criticism it is related to what they perceive as breaches of the principle of national sovereignty. Sometimes, this criticism is understandable, at other occasions, it is not.

The orientation of so many African leaders to seek explanations of their problems outside their own country or among those perceived as their enemies has been a major hurdle to development on the continent. That is why, the rise of a middle class that is broader and more heterogeneous is so important for the continent. There has been a gap between elite and masses that has been impossible to bridge despite socialist projects like *ujamaa* in Tanzania. A middle class that is diverse and can act in its own interest as a national project stands the best chance of bridging the gap between elite and masses. This is clearly the experience from other regions of the world. It is what is helping countries in Asia and Latin America to succeed in their development efforts. The political components of the middle class cannot manage this on their own. Government may help lay the foundation with the right policies but it is the productive forces in the middle class that can make the difference (Khan 2007).

Donors who have kept insisting that their aid has to go via the government have yet to rethink their strategy, but there are signs, as indicated above, that the governance rhetoric is giving way to talk about the need for supporting not just job creation but also a social transformation. In some African countries like Kenya this process is already under way. An increasing number of citizens, especially with middle class status, realize the hypocrisy of most politicians and support the implementation of constitutional reform as well as putting the main culprits behind the post-election violence in early 2008 on trial.

They raise their voice with increasing self-confidence but also concern because they know that despite lacking mineral resources of any significance, Kenya can make it if its productive forces are given the chance to act without fear that the risks are too high. As a consulting report on the rise of global competitors emerging on the African continent shows, those who have succeeded like Nigeria's Dangote Group or the South African Breweries, have not gone for quick profits but have adopted a long-term vision and strategy (Boston Consulting Group 2010). They have been able to avoid the short-term pressures typical of public companies. The report identifies forty "challengers" that are regionally or globally competitive. Most are concentrated to Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa but they can be found elsewhere too like EcoBank which is headquartered in Togo. There are also a number of semi-public challengers like Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines that are not even included in the number.

According to another consulting report, although Africa's growth and development in the past decade has been widespread and by no means confined merely to resource exploitation and export, African countries are at different points in their development (McKinsey Global Institute

2010). Already diversified economies like Egypt, Morocco, South Africa and Tunisia have significant manufacturing and service industries. They are Africa’s growth engines although with higher labor cost per unit their expansion on the global market meets with its own challenges. The continent also has a significant number of oil exporters, notably Algeria, Angola and Nigeria. These countries have the highest GDP per capita income but their economies are also among the least diversified. Many of the successes like Ghana, Kenya and Senegal fall into the category of transition economies. They have lower GDP per capita income than the countries in the first two groups but their economies are growing rapidly. Although the agriculture and resource sectors are important, these countries also export manufactured goods like processed food, chemicals, apparel and cosmetics. The fourth category of countries consists of pre-transition economies like Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Mali, also some of the poorest countries on the continent. Conditions among these countries vary, but one common factor is the shortcomings of basic economic variables like stable governments and a functioning and reliable market to facilitate trade and export of what is being produced.

These two consulting reports confirm that many African countries have come a long way in the past decade. There is a new dynamic that is driven as much from within the continent as from outside. Although no one can overlook the difficulties of operating in Africa where, as indicated above, capital markets are still shallow and infrastructure often inadequate, it would be wrong to judge the potential of the continent from past failures and problems. Differences among countries notwithstanding, most of them have enjoyed significant economic growth and development since 2000. Africa’s increasing ties to the global economy is supporting this growth and helps create new business opportunities and job creation, thus also fueling the growth of an urban consumer class to help drive the economy, as the McKinsey report points out.

Many of the new opportunities that arise will be seized by foreign investors. Many years ago, government leaders used to lament this. Some still do, but as long as they allow their own citizens to participate in the economy as investors and producers, fear is not the first thing to be associated with FDI. The emerging middle class in Africa views foreign investors not just as competitors but also as potential partners. Together they can help to get the policies right and encourage the growth of economic factors that will sustain the country’s effort to improve the human condition, including greater respect for the principles of good governance.

Learning from peers rather than masters

By being tied to the European and larger Western orbit, African countries have for a long time been used to taking their clues from their former colonial masters. Even countries like Guinea, Mali, Mozambique and Tanzania that tried their best to cut these ties failed to do so in a sustainable manner. Going it alone was out of question but entering the socialist orbit, whether under a Chinese or Soviet flag, proved not to be any more rewarding than the old ties. Furthermore, with first China and later Russia joining the capitalist bandwagon any radical materialist option has been ruled out. Africa’s fate today is being determined in the global market and rulers and citizens alike know and accept this. Thus, the knee-jerk reactions based on conspiracy theories about Western interests and designs in Africa are getting fewer and further apart. A number of factors help explain this shift in orientation.

The first is the growing economic interaction with other countries of the world. Trade and investment have brought African countries closer to the rest of the global South. Among Latin American countries, Brazil, and to a lesser extent Venezuela, have become important partners with several countries. China is the most prolific partner based first and foremost on its own resource needs but also as investor. For instance, many infrastructure projects these days in various countries are being built by Chinese companies, sometimes with international sources of funding. India, which has had a more controversial relationship with Africa because of the local presence of Indian Diaspora groups, has increasingly become a valued partner. Like China, it both invests and grants aid. Turkey, Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea are other Asian countries with a growing economic presence in Africa. Finally, there are the Arab Gulf States. They have less of a personal presence since most of their money, whether grants or loans, is channeled through special development funds but their contributions to infrastructural and social development are considerable, especially in African countries with a strong Muslim presence. South-South cooperation is a reality and has become so thanks to the global market (Lopes 2010). Africans, both leaders and citizens, are beginning to see both the strengths and weaknesses associated with this new line of cooperation. They become aware, for instance, that the Chinese also have their rough edges and may sometimes be no less exploitative or repressive in their day-to-day interaction with Africans in the work-place than Europeans are, as strikes and other incidents involving Chinese managers and supervisors in Tanzania and Zambia indicate.

The second factor is the fact that many of these countries have just moved from being poor to being "emerging" economies. Thus, they have an experience that in real time is directly relevant to Africa's own challenges. China is a particularly important case in point. It is very much in Africa for its own reasons, but its cooperation with African countries includes projects that build on its own development experience. As Brautigam (2010) points out, the Chinese are mindful that what they support must be relevant to present conditions in Africa, e.g. trade and export zones must not be isolated islands but sustainable over time. Hence, beneficiaries must find a low-technology niche that is suitable for the African circumstances. This does not mean that the Chinese always get it right or that the Africans find it easier to adopt their technology. Yet, there is an understanding of the broader rationale for this approach that gives the effort a greater chance of succeeding than many capital-intensive projects funded by the West or international development banks.

The third factor is the political change that is taking place in many countries in the Arab world. The outcome of the various uprisings are not necessarily going to produce liberal democracies but even if they don't they have already achieved a new political climate that is spreading to the African continent. African government leaders used to act with impunity toward their own citizens and they could often count on support from leaders in the Arab world. Today, this is no longer something that they can take for granted. People on the "Arab street" have become heroes in Africa and although mass uprisings of the kind that the world witnessed in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen may not occur in African countries, they are likely to serve as a warning to autocratic African government leaders that they have to watch what they do while in office.

Africans realize that they are no longer isolated. The global market, modern information technology and cheaper travels (not the least to Asian countries) have helped open the minds of a rapidly growing number of people in Africa. They do not typically go to these countries of the South to explicitly learn about governance, but even when visiting countries that are autocratic or semi-autocratic they become aware of their development achievements. As a result, many are returning to their home country wondering why their own government is not doing more to foster development. These individuals are in turn likely to influence opinions of their peers and thus build up a greater demand of government to act responsibly and accountably. This organic process that is taking place in many of the African countries is likely to be the most effective way of putting an end to past personal and discretionary rule that has plagued so much of the continent since independence. It is also the path through which African states in the long run can become more effective in implementing their policy objectives.

Learning lesson rather than teaching session

Because African countries, by and large, have been at the receiving end of the Western donor community for such a long time, they have also become used to taking their policy leads from that source. They have been induced to scribble notes rather than think creatively on their own. This situation has been exacerbated by the perceived distance between the level of achievement in developed and developing countries. Donors have typically looked upon recipient countries as pupils in the class-room in need of further knowledge. Recipients have experienced the situation from the other end: as being part of a teaching session where the objective is to learn from the master by taking his message seriously. Like most pupils in such situations, however, they have not always been attentive; nor have they always been ready to take the message to heart. This has become especially obvious in the past two decades with the donor community becoming increasingly focused on governance as a precondition for development. Its members have acted in a tutelary fashion and as masters in the class-room with all the problems that come with adopting in such a posture.

Being a tutor has its problems in any setting, but it becomes especially challenging when occurring in the political field. This is the first problem that partnership relations have suffered from in the past decade. Donors have gradually come to accept that recipients know a lot about how to put political reforms into practice and in more recent years have emphasized the need for recipient governments to have a greater say in how foreign aid is being dispensed in their respective country. At the same time, donors have insisted that such dispensation must be confined to a policy and governance agenda that is set in advance by OECD and reiterated in United Nations programs. The teacher wants a more interactive approach in the class-room but there is still a limit to what the pupils might say and do. The standard curriculum of the donors tend to be difficult for the recipients to fully appreciate and understand because they cannot relate to it very easily, yet it is this standard curriculum on which the donors are ultimately being evaluated.

The second problem is associated with the solution that donors typically find when they realize that there is a discrepancy between what they expect and what their partners in Africa are perceived as being capable of doing: capacity-building. The concept has its value if applied in a specific setting with a clear objective. Politics, however, is not one of them. It is messy and specifying attainable objectives is difficult, leave alone assessing reform interventions in this field. Yet, capacity-building is a favorite measure for donors and recipients alike. The former like it because it lends itself to measurement within specific project parameters. Recipients, on their part, embrace capacity-building because it enhances careers and, if carried out in foreign settings, a chance to earn a bit of valuable currency. Both approach it in an unrealistic manner: the donors overestimate both what it can accomplish and how it might be meaningfully evaluated; recipients, on their part, like it for reasons that are less related to the content than the circumstances of the effort.

This does not mean that capacity-building, even in the governance field, is a total waste. There are no doubt new ideas and practices that are being picked up here and there. In the long run, they may turn out to make a difference. The problem is that capacity-building has been treated as a miracle pill. Some of what is being done in its name is good, but a lot of it is being carried out with little relation to relevance and impact.

Africa's growing interaction with the rest of the world and, in particular countries in the global South, is beginning to change the perception of how governance is best improved. The new thinking is that the pupil must be put in the driver's seat from a very early point. Going through a lengthy driving-school is being abandoned in favor of a more open-ended learning experience on the road without the instructor sitting on the brake. This new approach carries a higher risk but it is also more rewarding and meaningful wherever it produces a sense of satisfaction and helps build self-confidence. People from African countries, whether in the political elite or not, approach this new opportunity to learn with open eyes. They begin to see that things that they used to take for granted about conditions in their country or elsewhere are not necessarily impossible to change. Events in the Arab world, as indicated above, are a great eye-opener; so are economic developments in China and India, two countries that many Africans only know as poor.

Learning is a broader and more flexible concept than what is going on in the class-room between teacher and pupil. As a result, it does not lend itself to standard testing. Individuals take in different things. Teaching systematizes, learning catalyzes. Teaching tends to be context-free, learning context-bound. That is the big difference. How much learning may achieve varies from one context to another, depending on the circumstances.

Learning theory is prevalent in studies of organizations and to lesser extent international relations. The definition of learning is not unanimous because it occurs at different levels –

individual, organizational and societal. Studies based on the micro-foundations of choice tend to accept that learning is possible only by individuals. Organizations and societies do not learn. More sociologically oriented students, however, disagree and argue that the latter have cognitive systems and memories that shape behavior and choice (Hedberg 1981). The distinction is also made between degrees of learning. Argyris and Schon (1978) identify three levels: "single-loop", "double-loop", and "deutero". The first refers to detection of error and typically results in corrective measures without discontinuing of existing policies and objectives. The second involves modification of existing objectives, policies and norms. An error causes a more thorough review of what the organization is doing and typically ends up in reform. The third is the ultimate form of learning because it entails "learning how to learn". In this learning scenario, members of an organization learn from previous learning experiences and device strategies that facilitate self-reflection and ways of assessing not only output or outcome but also process goals.

Pursuing the global good governance agenda has been too much a matter of teaching rather than learning. To the extent that learning has been part of the exercise, it has been confined to the simple, single-loop type whereby energy has been spent on trying to correct mistakes. There has been little attention paid to context and how local stakeholders can internalize new governance norms. A double-loop type of learning may be emerging in the context of interacting with the rest of the global South where conditions are more similar to those in Africa and where therefore it is easier to relate what is going on elsewhere to one's own situation.

Conclusions

There have been fears in political circles both in North America and Europe that China's increasingly strong presence in Africa will undercut many of the gains that the OECD donor community believes have been made in the governance field. In their perspective, human rights, democracy, the fight against corruption and all other measures that have been pursued in the last two decades in the name of good governance would be threatened by closer relations with China.

The fear is not wholly misplaced because the Chinese give priority to development over governance. In their political economy interpretation of the African continent, they would argue that liberal forms of democracy and individual civil and political rights belong to a different stage of development than the one African countries experience at present. This can obviously be interpreted as a political excuse but it is also a comment on the ongoing debate about the relationship between democracy and development where the Chinese take a more cautious position than the more assertive one taken on governance by the Western donors.

This paper has tried to show that there is a lot more going on that will shape the governance agenda in Africa in the years to come. First of all, surprise events like those in the Arab world, will no doubt continue to occur influencing the opinions of donors and Africans alike. There is much more political dynamism in the global South than what the West has at least so far been ready to grant. It is precisely therefore that greater exposure to and closer interaction with other countries in the South is likely to have an emancipating rather than confining effect on African governance. An Africa untamed from Western leashes is entering unknown territory. The risks are likely to increase but so are the possibilities for new advances. Not all countries will succeed and "the African street" is not necessarily a replica of its Arab counterpart. Yet, in a cost-benefit perspective when it comes to improving governance, African countries are likely to have at least as much to gain as they stand to lose.

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