Against 'Development'

Development does not exist. Better still, development is an argument, a fallacious one at that. The commitment of generations of African politicians, scholars and well-wishers to develop the continent over the past half a century has been a gross misunderstanding. Development is the phlogiston of our times, an illusion that is at the centre of Africa's failure to make good on the hard-won promises of independence. Two ideas are central to the notion of development. One is the belief that development describes the political, economic and social condition of Western countries. The other one, which is even more important, is the assumption that any country which follows a set of policy recommendations that are thought to have led to the present condition of Western societies, will attain a condition similar to them. In this paper I want to dissent against these ideas and suggest that an adequate African alternative to development is to be found in the kinds of policies which aim essentially at making everyday life more predictable.

The idea of 'development'

The argument goes: African countries must commit themselves to human rights and to a free market economy, they must uphold the rule of law, be fair in their political processes, train their workforce, give education to the young, bring succour to the suffering poor, observe gender equality, the rights of minorities, etc. In so doing they will be discharging precisely the tasks that lead to development. In other words, the very things which African countries are unable to do because their present condition prevents them from doing so are turned into preconditions for African development. Alas, these preconditions are precisely the properties of non-development. In other words, they describe Africa's condition.

Development can be defined as the inability of any given country to meet on its own terms certain specifiable human needs within its own territorial boundaries. Developing countries, by this definition, are those countries that are striving towards achieving this ability. By and large, the history of development aid over the past 50 years has been the history of accounting for its lack in the non-Western world. This has been done through the establishment of causal connections; for example between, on the one hand, history, environment, politics and culture, and economic growth, on the other. Often, history, environment, politics and culture in Africa are thought to be problematic, an assumption which leads to the conclusion that they account for the lack of development.

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Consequently, much development aid over the years has been informed by the idea that development can only be brought about through enlightened outside intervention in order to correct what history, the environment, politics and culture have done wrong. Not surprisingly, much development rhetoric carries missionary undertones and its practices have disciplinary elements to them (see Macamo 2005, 2003). Indeed, development rhetoric speaks to the conscience of Africans and urges them to be hard-working, honest, compassionate and sensitive to nature. Development practice in its turn submits African countries and Africans to monetary and fiscal discipline, forces upon them the observation of basic rules of democratic coexistence and, generally speaking, sanctions good behaviour defined in terms of a canon of values which developed in response to Europe's historical experience.

The problem with the assumption that simple causal relationships can adequately account for Africa's lack of development is that it often fails to acknowledge that such factors as have been found to correlate with lack of development appear, on close scrutiny, to be constant rather than invariant conditions for the lack of development. In fact, one could argue that while political instability, to name just one example, can be seen as an indicator of non-development, it does not, by itself, provide an explanation. Countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, which have experienced violent conflict in recent years, are not developed simply because they are politically unstable. Political instability is also the result of non-development. There is a need to understand how different factors interrelate to produce unique situations which render development from single general models elusive to individual countries. I argue that this understanding cannot be achieved without engaging with development as argument. What claims are being made in its name and what have they got to go on?

'Development' as argument

The basic claim that development discourse makes consists in the belief that aiming at developing itself is a desirable and possible goal for any country, especially African countries. This claim draws from different types of statistics which show very low standards of living in almost all African countries. The critical condition of such countries explains the need for development. Connecting the claim that Africa must develop with the objective condition of the continent is the assumption that development is a clearly definable goal towards which one can work. The present condition of Western countries is often used to illustrate this possibility, as ideas about how these countries were able to deal with the problems that are held to be typical of the condition of non-development are taken as useful lessons to be applied in tackling similar problems obtaining in Africa.

The problem with this claim is twofold. It begs the question and it is historicist. The claim that development is desirable in Africa because the continent lacks development is circular in nature. Since dire political, social, and economic conditions describe the condition of non-development, doing away with them does not explain why Africa should develop, but rather restates the problem. The practice of development aid, however, has shown that the real explanation for the

development claim is not the non-development of Africa. It is rather geo-political and strategic interests pursued by those who provide aid. The question which African countries have to address is whether such interests are consistent with their own nation-building efforts.

One case in point is NEPAD. I will dwell on it at some length to illustrate the point. There is a saying according to which no one is listening until you make a mistake. This seems to me a fitting description of the African experience. Bad news, in Africa, is good news, elsewhere. Good news, in Africa, is no news, elsewhere. Every piece of bad news finds its way into the international media to further support and lend legitimacy to the ever-present suspicion that Africans are resisting development. There is a genuine interest in the world today, for once, in a piece of good news from Africa: The NEPAD-initiative. There seems to be a general sense of optimism as to what NEPAD can achieve. This optimism might not be wholly unrelated to how the initiative goes out of its way to allay Western fears that Africans may not be interested in development.

In fact, it reasserts a commitment that, strange as though it may sound, has been constitutive of Africa as a modern idea. If one defines Africa as an idea with consequences—and not as an essential culture—one cannot escape the conclusion that it derives much of its substantive content from the pursuit of human dignity. Human dignity is historically contingent, but cumulative. Initially, it translated as human recognition; it then acquired the meaning of self-determination. The practice of independence—especially in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo—perverted the idea of Africa as the pursuit of human dignity by using African culture to give legitimacy to the will to power of post-independence politicians. With the wave of democratisation that swept across Africa in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, the idea of Africa is back on the agenda and translates as the search for stability in a world too impatient to wait for those whom Universal History slowed down.

NEPAD takes up the gauntlet of the times and seeks to own up to the continent's history. It is no coincidence that such an initiative is pushed forward by two countries that are in a position to start with

a clean slate: Senegal with its own political new beginning, and South Africa with its return to civilisation. NEPAD has two meanings. It means something for the continent and it means something else for individual countries. As far as the continent is concerned, NEPAD makes it more predictable to the rest of the world. NEPAD appears to speak to European fears and adjusts to the providential logic that underlies development aid: defining groups at risk and designing appropriate strategies to prevent them from harming healthy groups.

Underlying NEPAD's goals are two basic assumptions. Firstly, the assumption of the weak state as the cause of Africa's ills; secondly, the assumption of collective action as the way forward. These assumptions tie up with practical implications that I cannot discuss in detail, but are relevant to our understanding of the conditions under which NEPAD can lead the way to more ownership. The assumption of the weak state is cast in the dominant neoliberal discourse of our days, albeit with a subtle social Darwinian touch. Indeed, NEPAD argues that for reasons to do with the history of colonialism and decolonisation, Africa was not able to develop stable states. Furthermore, the African (read: OAU) injunction against changing colonial borders encouraged the survival of unfit states, which were marred by competing logics, neo-patrimonial political structures, misallocation of financial resources, stifling of business initiatives, and lack of competitiveness in the world. Only states such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, which had to defend their sovereignty, as it were, prove that they were fit for the fun of life in late capitalist times—were able to develop the kinds of structures that NEPAD wants to see erected throughout the continent.

There is, no doubt, something profoundly intelligent to this argument. It may even be obvious to most people, but I fail to understand the basis on which the mentors of NEPAD decided that the weak state was the cause of Africa's ills. In fact, one can turn the argument around: the weak state may well be the effect of Africa's problems. It is important to bear in mind that the relationship is a very complex one. It does Africa no good to insist, again and again, on the assumption that everything is easy to account for.

This is directly related to the second assumption. If the weakness of the state is the problem, then the only way out is collective action. In the economic language that permeates the whole document this is the only way countries can reduce externalities and increase their utilities. Collective action is a good thing and it has eluded us in Africa, in spite of all our best efforts, for a long time. The problem with it, however, is not that we are having a fresh try, but rather the assumption that it is the only rational way forward. I disagree.

For countries like Mozambique for example, collective action is a Catch-22 situation: joining NEPAD means that you have to abide by the rules of conduct it has set out, otherwise you may face sanctions which can even mean exclusion. Now, abiding by the rules is not the solution for Mozambique, but rather the problem. The only country in a position to abide by the rules is South Africa itself, which has a strong state in NEPAD's sense. For Mozambique to abide by the rules it would have to have a strong state. But if it had a strong state it would have to ask itself whether it is in its interest to join NEPAD. In other words, collective action assumes the kinds of things countries can only have if collective action works out.

This is a serious problem for NEPAD. If it does not insist on abiding by the rules it risks watering itself down and, thereby, returning the continent to the bad habits of the past: relying on the emotional strength of the idea of African unity as the basis for action. Now, while the assumptions underlying the initiative demonstrate the continent's willingness to move forward they also show the problems that are inherent in the idea. I recently asked my fellow countrymen in Mozambique—in a newspaper article—to engage with NEPAD on two grounds. Firstly, because its seriousness demands our attention. Secondly, because our recent history has shown us that we should not always trust our rulers' common sense. One question which I particularly emphasised was what institutional changes would have to take place in the country as a consequence of joining NEPAD. If everything stayed the same, then our commitment should be doubted.

One of the problems with being a developing country is that like the poor in eighteenth century British Workhouses

you always have to prove your eligibility for assistance. And this is time-consuming, actually much more than development tasks themselves. You must join NEPAD not because you want to have a strong state and be part of collective action, but because thereby you show your willingness to develop. It does not matter if you have PRSP, SAP; it does not matter if you are a member of Cotonou, WTO; nobody cares if you attend Millenium Challenge Account meetings in Washington. If anybody thinks up some new initiative you must join, otherwise you are not sufficiently committed. And then some development consultant comes around and finds out that your state officials are not honouring the commitments that come with membership and thinks, quite rightly so, that you are inefficient and cooks up some new project to make your state more efficient. And the whole thing starts again...

The second difficulty with the development claim is that it is a historicist argument. Development is viewed as an end worth striving for. Everything in the political, cultural, economic and social life of nations is, accordingly, subordinated to achieving this goal. The assumption, of course, is that the way to development is both known and accepted by most of those who are expected to make the trip. While James Scott's *Seeing like a State* (1998) may be read as a caricature of government efforts to improve the lot of its citizens, it is a useful reminder of the dangers of totalitarianism. In his critique of historicism, the philosopher Karl Popper (1965) established an organic link between historicism and totalitarianism by drawing attention to how belief in the inevitability and desirability of certain states of affair invites coercive attitudes. A measure of how the development claim has become totalitarian is the moral opprobrium attached to the accusation that a country is refusing development. Robert Mugabe's mostly erratic political course in recent years has attracted much criticism from developed countries. Central to this criticism is not so much the set

of historical, economic and political factors to which he is responding in the very specific conditions of Zimbabwe. Rather, and as the discussions around the recent Africa Initiative of Britain's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, showed, Mugabe is being criticised mainly because his policies, taken as a whole, seem to document lack of interest in development. Indeed, development and all that comes with it, has become the measure of common sense in the world of countries which do not have the same degree of economic, political and social achievement as Western countries.

Development as piecemeal social engineering

The search for African alternatives to development must begin with a resistance against the present understanding of development. While African countries should commit themselves to political, economic and social stability and justice, they must also resist the temptation to reduce their horizons to the view purveyed by the current development discourse. If, as I believe, development is a bad argument that might lock African countries into a totalitarian vicious circle, then it appears that real alternatives must be those which seek to tackle the small problems that make everyday life in Africa unpredictable.

These problems vary in nature and cannot be properly grasped with reference to the distant language of economics and political science. In other words, the everyday life of Africans is not made difficult by balance of payments' problems or shortcomings in political accountability. Much more fundamental, and understandable, are problems to do with lack of jobs and stable incomes as well spaces for the discussion of local problems with the other members of one's community. Most Africans, especially in rural areas, have become guests in their own worlds. The private spaces of their lives have been invaded by foreign artefacts and ideas over which they have no control: Bio-medicine, schools, civil en-

gineering works such as roads and bridges, political parties, election laws and rules, human rights, etc. These are mostly brought to Africans in the name of development. Ideally such artefacts and ideas should contribute towards improving their livelihood. However, they can only achieve this if Africans are able to domesticate them and make them relevant to their everyday life. Significantly, non-development is also the inability to tame these artefacts and ideas, a fact which should throw additional light on the perverse side of development. As pointed out by James Scott (1998), schemes to improve the human condition can have perverse effects. Development itself, within the African context, is one of the major unacknowledged sources of unpredictability in the everyday life of Africans.

Many years ago, the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper suggested in his trenchant critique of historicism (Popper 1965) that social change is often the result of what he unpretentiously called 'piecemeal social engineering'. It is not the big eschatological goal that should structure social life, but the small things that constrain individuals in their everyday life. It seems to me that an adequate African alternative to development can be one that takes its cue from Popper's approach. Development should consist of policies designed to solve local problems with means that do not require more than the material and intellectual resources which people have at their disposal.

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