
CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND EMERGING ISSUES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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There are ten critical challenges ahead for sub-Saharan Africa. Each greatly affects the future of the forty-eight nation-states. Responses to each of the challenges by Africa, the individual countries within Africa, and by outside powers—notably the United States, the European Union, and China—will determine whether or not sub-Saharan Africans in this and later decades remain impoverished, conflicted, under-educated, and unhealthy. How Africans cope with the ten critical challenges, and how China and the West seek to help Africans help themselves will determine the positive or negative life experiences of millions of Africans, including generations as yet unborn.

In order of priority, with each succeeding challenge being shaped by the preceding challenge, the ten challenges are:

I—Leadership

The poorer and more fragile the nation-state, the more leadership matters and is decisive. Sub-Saharan Africa is composed of forty-eight nation-states, most of which are small and poor. No other continent boasts so many polities. The African nation-state denominator is imposingly large. It thus requires numerous national leaders across a universe where human resource capacities are extremely stretched. Whereas in the West, where many politicians can lead their nation-states, in Africa the choices are much more limited and more critical for good or ill. Moreover, in relatively new states with only embryonic political institutions and protean political cultures, individual leaders have greater capacity to shape the contours of their societies. Authoritarianism and corrupt dealing are much easier where there are no countervailing sources of power, aside from the state, and where the institutions are weak and nations have not yet been built. How else to explain Mobutu Sese Seko, Idi Amin, and Robert Mugabe?

The experiences of two sub-Saharan African nation-states, Botswana and Mauritius, illustrate the power of good leadership for human advancement, for economic growth, and for the absence of conflict. In both small states, founding leaders shifted their young nations away from the prevailing African norms and created democratic political cultures that enabled strong institutions to be nurtured and real nations to be built. No where else on the continent have citizens been served so well by their leaders.

We can contrast South Africa under Nelson Mandela and under Thabo Mbeki to demonstrate the importance of leadership for prosperity, education, health, and so on. We can contrast Zimbabwe under Mugabe I (1980 to 1998) and under Mugabe II (1998–) and note the critical importance of leadership for good—for the commonweal. Another obvious contrast is Charles Taylor and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia and Jerry Rawlings and John Kufuor in Ghana. We can also examine the leadership opportunities lost in Zambia under Kenneth Kaunda, Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah, and Nigeria under everyone after Yakubu Gowon to illustrate the critical difference that leadership makes.

Those of us who care about the future of Africa and Africans should find creative ways to nurture future generations of responsible African leadership. The African Leadership Council, chaired by former President Sir Ketumile Masire of Botswana, has a plan to train young elected political leaders and prevent the rise of Mugabes.

The fate of Africa and responses to the next nine challenges for Africa depend entirely on improving African leadership.

II—Governance

Good leadership begets good governance. Good governance makes the wheels go round, mitigates conflict between and within nation-states, contributes to positive economic growth and therefore to the alleviation of poverty, enhances food security, and responds directly to the expectations and needs of citizens.

In a series of articles, and in the 2007 and 2008 Indexes of African Governance, I put forward a method of measuring and quantifying good governance. It defines governance anywhere in the world, in any sized jurisdiction, as the delivery of essential political goods to a country or a city's citizens.

There are five overarching and encapsulating political goods: Safety and Security; Rule of Law, Transparency, and Corruption; Participation and Human Rights; Sustainable Economic Opportunity; and Human Development. We at Harvard have developed those large categories of political goods by asking what each of us as constituents of nation-states, or of municipalities, wants from our governments. Public opinion polls support the notion that all citizens everywhere want these same political goods; no one volunteers to be insecure or subject to crime, to be without something called a rule of law, to be devoid of health or education, or deprived of clean water, access to inoculations, and so on.

We at Harvard measure those five categories of political good by measuring them fifty-seven different ways, using outcomes, and objective data in preference to perceptions. That is, governance is broken down fifty-seven ways, the results measured and summed to provide a ranking of the forty-eight sub-Saharan African states according to performance—according to the delivery of political goods. The purpose of this measurement exercise is not the ultimate rankings, although those are interesting and instructive. The main goal is to provide a method of diagnosing how each society can improve itself—how a good government can reform in order to serve its people better or how an energetic civil society can encourage its government to improve, and in what particular sectors.

We have learned that Africa can be better governed. Using our scheme, it is clear that the most highly ranked three or five sub-Saharan African countries are much better governed than all of the others, and that the least well-governed—the bottom ten—perform atrociously. Thus the task for Africa, African nation-states, China, and the West is to find methods to strengthen governance in Africa. If our goal—if the goal of Washington, London, and Brussels—is to improve the welfare, health, and educational attainments of Africans, then it behooves us to focus first on leadership and then on governance. Nothing will make a bigger difference to Africa in the near and medium term.

III—Reducing Conflict

In late-2008, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, the Sudan, and Uganda still harbor hot intrastate hostilities. There has been a recent coup in Mauritania and Burundi still simmers. In Kenya and Zimbabwe political differences could shortly lead to internal battles and more loss of life. Since 1990 more than 15 million Africans have lost their lives in these civil wars. The overriding task of Africa, the UN, and the West is to transform sub-Saharan Africa from a killing field to a continent of peace.

Well-led and well-governed countries do not go to war or suffer the collapse of legitimacy and the rise of discrimination which motivates civil conflict. Thus, by improving leadership and governance in sub-Saharan Africa, the continent's nation-states themselves and Washington and Brussels will do more to prevent the kinds of societal breakdown which have beset Africa and proved so costly for human life and prosperity.

That said, sub-Saharan Africa is apt to remain in conflict for years to come. The battles in Darfur, and possibly again in south Sudan, and the conflict in the eastern Congo will not soon end. There may be new Cote d'Ivoires and, if a country the size of Nigeria erupts into a war beyond the Delta, the West must be prepared.

How best to be prepared: To strengthen American knowledge and awareness at the official level, to upgrade American intelligence capabilities, and to pay closer attention to the dynamics of Africa are essential. Washington, despite the shadows of Iraq and Afghanistan, needs to flex its diplomatic muscles more often and to better effect. Washington can, if well informed, mediate more and help reduce conflicts as they arise. There is plenty of early warning, but early action is hard unless Washington is better prepared than it has been to act forthrightly on its own and in concert with the African Union and the UN. Forging tighter ties to allies, and to China, would help.

IV—Food Insecurity

This is a major contemporary problem which depends as much on job and cash shortages as it does on food scarcity. Admittedly, Africans are at the bottom of the world's food supply chain, suffering from adverse northern political decisions and subsidies and intensified Asian demand. Improved African leadership and governance, reduced corruption, and Western assistance for agricultural reforms and infrastructural upgrades will help to reduce food insecurities.

But major changes must take place in Africa as well. In the 1970s and 1980s, many African governments destroyed their farming economies by over-subsidizing urban dwellers and unwittingly forcing farmers to immigrate to the cities. Africa, as a result of bad local policies, is now an urban continent.

Admittedly, the North could help Africa by reducing crop subsidies and lowering tariff barriers. Africans will continue to be exporters of primary commodities for years to come. Their markets can only grow with Western political help and technical assistance.

The African green revolution initiative deserves American support. So does a new focus on technology transfers. Low tech initiatives are particularly welcome. In this manner, the West can help African states help themselves.

V—Health and Water

The security of the peoples of the West depends more than they realize on strengthening the health and welfare of the peoples of disease-ridden Africa. The distribution of anti-retroviral medicines and insecticide-impregnated bed nets is important in the difficult battles against HIV and malaria, as is the new attention given to research on and the remediation of Africa's many other tropical disease scourges. The renewed awareness of TB, especially the multi-drug and extensively drug resistant versions and their co-infection with HIV, is salutary. Africa is a locus of pioneering efforts to introduce successful versions of directly observed short course therapy (DOTS) for all forms of TB, but much more support from the West, especially from Washington and American philanthropic foundations, is required.

Additionally, Africa is desperately water short—for human consumption, for sanitation, and for agricultural irrigation. Too much of African agriculture is rain dependent. Given the importance of clean water to health outcomes, as demonstrated years ago in Costa Rica, it is important for donor governments and donor foundations to help Africans clean up the ground water to which they already have access as well as to sponsor drilling for sustainable long-term supplies. Investments in low-cost, low-tech ram devices will also help, as will methods to capture and impound rain water.

Some analysts claim that the conflict in Darfur is essentially a result of scarce water resources. Whether or not that is so, water everywhere is a security issue, as well as a health issue. The West needs in the short- and long-term to help Africa develop existing and new methods of finding and using water.

VI—Climate Change

Africa is being pummeled by the effects of global climate change. Yet Africa has no real control or agency. Anything that the North and China can be induced to do to lessen carbon dioxide and other dangerous emissions will benefit Africa—eventually. In the short-term, Africa will suffer. At the margin the West can at least assist Africa to gain more information about what is happening. The proliferation of simple tools like rain gauges would help significantly.

VII—Energy

Many observers were surprised by the 2007 and 2008 energy crises in South Africa, where load shedding is still common, and in Ghana, Uganda, and many other sub-Saharan African countries. In fact, most of Africa is seriously short of power because of the long-term failure to maintain and re-invest in generation facilities, because of the impact of climate change on water flows for hydroelectricity generation, and because of a widespread inability to understand the impact of urbanization.

The West needs to help Africa modernize in this area. Consideration needs to be given to solar, wind, and tide power generation, and to micro-local experiments with low-tech generation of renewable energy through slime.

VIII—Infrastructural Deficits

Africa's infrastructure—especially roads and railways—is woefully inadequate. There has been precious little investment in this area, especially in the war-torn countries of conflict. Given the theme developed at the beginning of this policy brief, all one needs to do is to contrast the road networks of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Botswana at independence and now. Funds from the West for road construction are still valuable, but funds for maintaining existing road networks are even more relevant. Fortunately, this is an area where the Chinese are active in Africa, and spending large sums in their own commercial interest.

Economic growth, modernization, conflict reduction, and a host of other good outcomes are impossible without improved infrastructures. Fortunately, when nations are well-led and well-governed, infrastructural requirements are looked after well. All of the top-ranking nations in the recently released 2008 Index of African Governance benefit from strong and growing infrastructures.

IX—Growth and Prosperity

If Africans and the West (and China) attend to all of the above challenges, Africans will prosper. The more stable they become, the more their water and energy needs are assured, the better their infrastructures, and the more they act against rampant corruption, the more they will create domestic and foreign investment and new jobs.

In addition to the various interventions suggested above, the West can help African countries reform their business practices and reduce their onerous regulations. We in the West also need to provide much easier access to our own markets and create sustainable opening on the lines of the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act.

It is likely, too, that China will provide a consistent and growing market for African minerals and commodities, and for some manufactured goods. If so, China's latest intrusion into Africa will benefit Africans everywhere in significant ways.

X—Terrorism and Specific Conflicts

Washington and other Western capitals will continue to focus on the existing conflict danger zones—Zimbabwe, Congo, Nigeria, and the Sudan. Somalia is increasingly under the sway of Islamists with ties to al Qaeda. Likewise, the Salafist movements in the northern and middle Sahara have not been eliminated.

The general answer in every instance is improved leadership and governance, but specific policies obviously must be crafted to help remove Mugabe, strengthen Kabila's better instincts, and persuade the post-Olympics Chinese to assist Western and UN peace-brokering in Darfur and South Sudan. In Somalia, the Ethiopians are wavering and the Ugandans are ineffectual. Occasional U.S. missile strikes do not constitute a real solution. A strong UN intervention is unlikely. The Somali population, however, is largely malleable. One way of approaching the Somali problem would be to recognize the stable and mostly democratic Republic of Somaliland. That might encourage Somali themselves to build better government back up from the local level, and possibly without Islamist dominance.

Conclusion

Africans, with Western and Chinese assistance, urgently need to strengthen leadership and governance attainments if the nation-states of sub-Saharan Africa are to grow rapidly, begin to alleviate poverty and sickness, provide enhanced educational opportunities, and end mayhem within their borders. Otherwise, the lives and welfare of nearly 1 billion Africans south of the Sahara will continue to be compromised severely. There is much to be done, and good leaders can do it.