How can Africa develop? Reflections on theories, concepts, policies and realities

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Discussions surrounding the prospects for development in Africa revolve around a number of arguments that make important assumptions about both the situation on the continent and the effects of the policies being adopted. Whilst most of the debate concerns the modalities of more effective development policies or more appropriate foreign aid programmes, this chapter looks at the approaches taken in thinking through these questions. It reconsiders the main concepts, theories and models used by observers, practitioners and scholars alike to assess the extent to which the analytical instruments we use are deficient. Revisiting the ways in which we conceptualize development and aid may be a useful step in contributing to a better understanding of the realities that often baffle or elude us.

Introduction

Can Africa develop? Blunt as this question may be, I believe it needs to be asked again and again. And this is for a very simple reason: there is, in the end, very little agreement on what development in the present context means and there is fierce debate on the role of development assistance. Indeed, at a time when some are calling for an end to foreign aid to Africa, it seems important to think afresh about why Africa appears not to be developing. Is the problem one of needing greater assistance, better governance, a stronger state, less corruption or more dedicated leadership? Or is the problem to do with how we think through the process of development and conceptualize the ways in which it can be achieved? Do we need more aid or a paradigm shift?

The optimists make four points. First, they argue that there has been a notable upswing in economic growth in Africa, as is testified by the higher GDP
in many countries. Economic activity and exports have also increased and internal revenues have risen. Second, the amount of violence (civil war, warlordism and regional conflicts) has dropped, with great improvement having been made in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. Third, democratization in the form of multiparty elections has become established across most of the continent: the African Union is zealous in its lack of tolerance regarding the illegal seizure of power. And finally, great progress has been made in containing and treating HIV/AIDS. The integrated health model that has reduced the number of new HIV cases could serve as a template in the fight against other major diseases on the continent too.

The pessimists rebut these arguments. First, they point out that GDP per capita has hardly increased since the population is continuing to grow at a rapid level. In addition, GDP is distorted by export figures, which are no indication of development. And despite the rise in GDP, income differentials and poverty have also risen. Second, while it is true that some of the worst cases of civil conflict have ended, many remain, like Darfur and DRC, which are lingering on despite international intervention. In addition, criminality and gang violence are on the increase across the continent. Third, the process of democratization has shown its limits (cf. Abbink & Hesseling 2000). In many instances, such as Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire and Congo, multiparty elections have actually led to civil strife. And in any event, careful study of these elections shows that the parties in power have learnt how to ‘manage’ democracy to their continued advantage. Finally, in spite of the progress made in the treatment of HIV/AIDS, there is little prospect that overall health levels in Africa will improve as long as poverty is widespread.

Such radical disagreements are puzzling since they show diverging opinions or interpretations of what ought to be well-researched facts. At the very least, they highlight how, in many ways, we continue to be at a loss as to how best to understand what is going on in Africa. But rather than add yet another voice to the debate about whether Africa is making progress or not, I would prefer to pitch the argument here at a different level. I should like to offer some reflections on a number of key concepts and highlight the importance of conceptualizing how we approach the question of development in Africa. And in so doing, I hope to suggest that what matters most is how we ask the questions, not whether we can provide the ‘right’ answers.

I begin by revisiting the concepts of development, aid and accountability with a view to clarifying what it is we are talking about. I then discuss the importance of the analytical standpoint, the relevance of history and the issue of causality before concluding with some remarks on the limits of Western social theory.