Africa as Topic in the UN

From the outset the process of de-colonization was of overall importance with regard to Africa in the organs of the United Nations. After the majority of African countries had gained their independence in the early sixties, Africa played an increasingly important role for the specialized agencies and other UN bodies dealing with development issues (Development Cooperation of the UN), such as UNECA, UNCTAD, UNDP, WHO, FAO, ILO, UNIDO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNEP. But it was not until the 80s that Africa became a special topic for the UN, as for the first time a whole continent was a subject for the UN.

The development crisis in the eighties

This special commitment was induced by the African development crisis which then became more and more obvious. The “lost development decade” left deep marks in Africa. The collapse of commodity prices during this period hit the continent particularly hard, especially as in most African countries exports are based on just a few commodities (monocultures).

Therefore, most countries became extremely over-indebted, despite comparatively high Official Development Assistance (ODA) flows to Africa as bilateral and multilateral aid. Corrupt elites and conflicts that were escalated by East-West rivalry increased the economic drain. Furthermore, a vicious circle ensued between the overexploitation of resources and natural disasters. The modernization achievements of the 60s and 70s were destroyed. Impoverishment and social decline became rampant. States could no longer fulfill their core obligations for the welfare of their peoples. Some states even collapsed.

The response of the IMF and the World Bank (World Bank Group) to this development crisis was to impose Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). However, their impact was as if thirst was being quenched with seawater. The first generation of SAPs in particular deepened the slump. Devaluations and liberalization of exchange rates as part of SAPs increased the oversupply of commodities on world markets, and accelerated the erosion of commodity prices. At the same time imports became more expensive. As a result, SAP-funding sometimes was not even enough to pay for essential imports. Therefore, debt and debt service could not be reduced as intended by SAPs, but were in fact further increased. The economic austerity measures led to demand compression of public as well as private households. This virtually destroyed the achievements of the first phase of industrialization in the field of import substitution.

The Programme of Action for Africa UNPAAERD


UNPAAERD was a framework for the development actors in Africa including the international donor community. It was prompted by the famine which ravaged large parts of Africa in 1983/84, which had in turn resulted from the drought caused by the El-NinoPhenomenon. This phenomenon had then occurred for the first time simultaneously north (Sahel and Horn of Africa) and south (Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique) of the equator. All over the world, solidarity actions in support of the African peoples involved pop stars, athletes and the media. In Germany the Public Broadcasting Network ARD organized a special “Africa Day”. The 13th Special Assembly of the UN was accompanied by fundraising events, such as a concert and the “world race against the time”, produced by Bob Geldof.

UNPAAERD, and its base document prepared by the African governments
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(entitled “Africa’s submission to the special session of the United Nation General Assembly on Africa’s economic and social crisis”), avoided an assessment of economic structures and of their conformity with markets, as had been the focus of the SAPs of IMF and World Bank. They simply estimated the financial flows required to meet given sectoral economic growth targets. The resulting financial gap for the whole continent to be filled by ODA was four times greater than had been estimated by the World Bank.

During the first five years of the programme, Africa’s share of global ODA flows rose from 35% in 1985 to 37% in 1987. Therefore the target set by UNPAAERD to fill the annual ODA gap estimated at 9 billion US dollars was almost met. But otherwise the results were distressing. Some examples may highlight the failure, which at the same time required considerable sacrifices (UN Doc. A/45/591 of 8 October 1990 and A/RES/46/151). The ratio between budget revenues and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the whole of Africa was increased from 22% in 1986 to 24% in 1989, and public deficits were reduced from 7% to 5% of GDP. But this led to a cut of average incomes in the civil service by 50%. The expenditures for health and education were down by 50% and 25% respectively. Enrolment in primary education fell from 80% to 70%. One third of the pupils in primary schools dropped out within the first two years. The savings rate stagnated at 16%, despite an increase in real interest rates; in 1980 the savings rate had been as high as 24%. The investment rate dropped from 24% to 19%. The rate of food self-sufficiency in Africa decreased from 92% in 1980 to 85% in 1990. In the five-year period of the programme the number of the very poor increased from 270 to 335 million, which is 52% of the total African population. The number of unemployed went up as well, from 100 to 130 million.

The dependency of most African countries on the export of commodities grew during the programme period. In four out of five countries the ratio of commodity exports to total exports is above 80%. Finally, debts leaped up from 212 billion US dollars in 1986 to 272 billion US dollars in 1990, which corresponds to 110% of GDP (in Latin America the ratio was less than 50%).

The “New Agenda” for Africa: UNNADAF

Despite these sobering results, the UN General Assembly adopted a new ten-year special programme on 18 December 1991, the “United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 90s” (UNNADAF). The main target of this programme was a 6% annual rate of economic growth for the whole of Africa. Human development through health and education became the focus of development. The promotion of peace was put center stage and pressure was mounted on African governments to enhance democratization (Democratization and the UN), improve good governance and accelerate market-friendly reforms for the benefit of private investment.

A midterm review was carried out in 1996 (UN Doc. A/51228 and Add.1 and UN Doc. A/AC.25/5), which still drew a bleak picture. But it also identified first signs of a turn in the trend. It was established that only a few countries remained with negative per capita economic growth. On the other hand, only seven countries achieved the annual GDP growth target of at least 6%. The overall economic growth rate in Africa increased from 0.7% 1993 to 2.3% in 1995.

The decrease of overall ODA to Africa from 25 billion US dollars in 1992 to 21 billion US dollars in 1991 was deplored. Simultaneously debts grew by 50 billion US dollars, to 332 billion US dollars in 1995. The ratio of debts to multilateral institutions reached almost one third of all debts. Despite numerous negotiations in the Paris Club to reduce debt, the debt-service ratio with exports for all Africa rose above 30%.2