

CAN WE RE-IMAGINE AN AFRICA WITHOUT POVERTY?

INTRODUCTION

Africa is a continent of infinite possibilities yet it remains the most underperforming region in the world, in socioeconomic development terms.

The challenge we face as the African Academy of Sciences is how we use our position as thought leaders to challenge our fellow Africans to imagine a continent without poverty.

Es'kia Mphahlele an eminent African literature and education expert spoke of the importance of imagination as a driving force for change.

“the beauty of this adventure is that the imagination does not wait for the day when we shall have rid ourselves of tyranny. It overarches history and may get there long before the event.”

I would like to propose that we as Africa's thought leaders have fallen into the trap of believing the biblical saying that the poor will always be with us.

Post colonial Africa has largely accepted the inherited patterns of inequality and the assumptions of authoritarian governance systems that have condemned the majority of Africans to poverty, unemployment and inequality.

In this talk I would like to challenge us first to reimagine an Africa without poverty. Second to explore what it would take to make that reimagined Africa a reality using our position as scientists. Third, I would like us to explore how we engage our fellow citizens in the context of science in, and for society.

Reimagining Africa without Poverty

It is difficult to reimagine Africa without poverty in a context in which most post colonial African education systems have neglected the teaching of African studies. African history particularly the antiquity period is an essential foundation to anchor our pride in our identity as Africans. It is difficult for Africans to imagine themselves as contributors to the foundations of the global knowledge system we have today without that knowledge of African history.

Cheik Anta Diop a Senegalese national, dedicated his life and academic career to challenging the negation of the contribution of black Africans to civilization. He devoted his life to documenting the contributions of Africa to global civilisation as we know it, by tracking the Nubian Egyptian knowledge system which in his view should be treated the same way as the Greco-Roman system.

Diop's work complements the work of many academics challenging the notion of European superiority. The rise and fall of nations across the globe remain complex issues driven by multiple factors in various combinations across space and time. The rise and fall of the Egypto-Nubian empires gave way to others in both the east and west. The first Europeans to explore Sub Saharan Africa's west coast were amazed at what they encountered. According to Diop:

“When they reached the Bay of Guinea and alighted at Vaida, the captains were astonished to find well-planned streets bordered for several leagues by two rows of trees; for days they traversed a countryside covered by magnificent fields, inhabited by men in colorful attire that they had woven

themselves! More to the south, in the Kingdom of the Congo, a teeming crowd clad in silk and velvet, large States, well ordered down to the smallest detail, powerful rulers, prosperous industries. Civilized to the marrow of their bones!

Entirely similar was the condition of the lands on the east coast, Mozambique, for example. The revelations of the navigators from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries provide positive proof that Black Africa, which extended south of the desert zone of the Sahara, was still in full bloom, in all the splendor of harmonious, well-organized civilizations. This flowering the European conquistadors destroyed as they advanced.”¹

The most important damage wrought by imperial and colonial conquest is the cultural and mental murder of indigenous Africans. The systematic looting of natural, mineral and human resources of Africa was justified on the basis that indigenous people were inferior beings who were less than human. What started as a convenient distortion of reality became embedded as a racist way of life.

Reality and myth merged to become a way of life. Dehumanization of the “other” has become part of the standard operating procedure for subjugation and exploitation. Africa is often depicted as a continent that invented nothing, created nothing and contributed nothing to human civilization.

He used his considerable intellect as a physicist, mathematician, linguist and Anthropologist to document the rich ancient civilization of the Egypto-Nubian region as the original human civilization. He demonstrates how the celebrated Greek icons: Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Pythagoras, were students of Egyptian gurus from whom they plagiarized work now universally touted as theirs.

What would it take for Africa to reinvent itself as a prosperous continent?

At the heart of persistent poverty and inequality is the combination of the legacy of authoritarian traditional leadership structures and the devastating exploitative colonial systems. That legacy impoverished African citizens emotionally, spiritually and materially. Poverty in this context is more than the lack of material wellbeing but the assault on the self-respect and dignity of people.

History matters. The African continent needs to be freed from the social pain of the wounds of the legacy of the colonial period. Acknowledgement, forgiveness and active programs to make right what went wrong, are all critical elements on the pathway to sustainable reconciliation. South Africa is a poster child of the cost of leaving socio-economic restructuring out of the reconciliation process. Our persistent poverty, inequality and unemployment, and recent resurgence of violent racist tensions, are a direct result of our failure to heed the lessons of the German example.

¹ Cheikh Anta Diop, The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality.

To add insult to injury, post colonial Africa continues to suffer the impact of post liberation leadership systems that have failed to live up to the principles of good governance. Poverty persists because of the failure to put human rights and dignity at the centre of national development efforts.

Post-liberation African leaders have yet to make the transition from liberation politics towards democratic politics.

The values of liberation politics focus on 'them and us', lack of transparency, winner takes all and the end justifies the means. These are in stark contrast to democratic values.

Their excuse is that neo-colonial interests could reverse the gains of liberation. Unfortunately for African countries many of the values and ethics of liberation politics run counter to the requirements of democratic governance. We should not be surprised at the reversals of democratic gains in much of our beautiful continent. Life long presidencies are back in fashion, as is impunity in dealing with political opponents.

The notion of the citizen as sovereign in our democratic systems is yet to be established. Most African governments are leader driven rather than people centred. There is little accountability to citizens as the focal point of public service.

For example South Africa's transition to democracy is celebrated and underpinned by a highly regarded constitution. The commitment that South Africans made in the preamble of that constitution was to *"heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights."*²

The question before us today is why have we done so poorly in establishing this envisaged society where social justice and human rights (including socio-economic rights) reign supreme?

At the heart of our underperformance as a society is our underestimation of the importance of healing the wounds of the past. We have to acknowledge that both citizens and leaders are wounded by a system that undermines the precepts of the fundamental African philosophy of Ubuntu which is "I am, because you are". Millennia of wisdom in Africa has been encapsulated in the understanding that human beings are created for connectedness to others.

When we break that connectedness we disable our capacity to see ourselves in others and them to see themselves in us. This connectedness enables empathy, that drives social relationships that put human rights at the centre.

Poverty is not the absence of resources but an expression of the inequity of the allocation of resources in a given society.

In the South African context persistent poverty, unemployment and inequality reflect our failure to heal the wounds of divisions of the past. The face of poverty and unemployment remains black, and predominantly women. This poverty profile matches the social-engineering targets of the colonial and apartheid projects. Only a strategic restructuring of our

² Preamble of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

socio-economic system can undo the systemic poverty generating process that is embedded in our society.

Persistent apartheid geographic profiles of our cities and towns are testimony to our failure to transform our urban landscapes to create environments for equitable access to the resources essential for sustainable livelihoods and wellbeing. The poorest people live furthest from the centre of our cities and towns, making poverty very expensive: transport to and from workplaces; poor neighbourhoods with poorer quality public services; lack of access to rich cultural assets. The same patterns pertain in many other African countries.

Education, worldwide is regarded as the sure and tested way out of poverty. Confucius' wisdom posits - that only educated people can be free people. The most successful countries in Africa are those that have paid attention to building education systems that are efficient, effective and high quality. For example Mauritius pulled itself out of poverty by focusing on transforming its education system to the success it is today. The same applies to Botswana and post genocide Rwanda.

Africa needs to transform its education systems into accessible high quality ones that put the African History, culture and languages at the centre. In the case in South Africa we could have done better if we had listened to Es'kia Mphahlele's advice

*"A genuine programme of non-racialism, in which we Africans must play a major role, tapping the best minds amongst other population groups, must eventually lead to the Africanization of our institutions of learning. This goes beyond simply filling our schools and colleges with majority blacks. It means revolutionizing the whole range of our curricula, giving them a new direction, a humanistic thrust distinct from the tyranny of didactic approaches that have choked up all the channels of education."*³

Our education systems need to prepare African citizens for the 21st century going beyond the focus developing technical capabilities to promote a higher consciousness of citizenship with its rights and responsibilities.

No democracy can flourish without active citizens, yet civic education hardly features in any curriculum in our countries education systems.

I would like to propose that the African Academy of Sciences give leadership to the strengthening of the development of civic consciousness in all of our countries. Citizens are the only guarantors of robust democracies in which leaders can be held accountable.

African countries are not investing enough resource's material and intellectual to ensure that we develop the kind of informed active citizens that drive sustainable development of the country.

African Academy of Sciences Leadership Role

³ ESKIA, 2002, p19

The failure of our education systems to teach the history of Science to highlight Africa's contribution to the foundations of scientific knowledge has created major distortions.

For example in South Africa young student protestors are calling for the decolonisation of Science that has been positioned by their professors and others as a Western invention. It is a crying shame that we have denied young Africans sufficient depth of knowledge to embrace Science as part of African culture.

Tertiary education institutions should take the responsibility to correct this distortion, to enable Africa's people to embrace Science as a global public good to which many cultures have contributed.

The eradication of poverty can only be possible in an environment where all African citizens have access to quality education that enables them to adopt modern knowledge and technical solutions to the problems that flow from poverty and perpetuate poverty.

Africa also needs to break from the trap of state capture by its leaders across the continent.

State Capture is enabled by the conflation of the person of the leader, the party, the government and the state. It is the capture of the states that creates the distortion in the allocation of resources that deprives the majority of people of basic public service such as high quality education, healthy living environments that are essential for sustainable livelihood.

At the heart of persistent poverty in Africa is poor governance. The Mo Ibrahim Index of good governance has been measuring African countries performance over the last ten years. Countries that have done best on this index and those that have improved the most have significantly reduced or eradicated poverty. The top performers are Cape Verde, Botswana, Mauritius and the most improved was Rwanda.

South Africa's performance on the Ibrahim Index has deteriorated remarkably over the last few years due to increasing levels of corruption, nepotism, incompetence, maladministration and growing levels of state capture.

It is not poverty of resources but the quality of governance that matters. The question for the Academy is – in what way can we use our scientific knowledge and understanding to promote better governance in our individual countries and the continent as a whole?

Are we as scientists seeing good governance as a legitimate area of concern for us to play an active role as citizen of our individual countries and the continent as a whole?

It is inconceivable that a continent with the youngest population profile such as Africa can eradicate poverty without considerable investments in the development of the talents of each of its children and young people. Such investments would have to come from appropriate utilisation of our enormous natural and mineral resources to drive sustainable development across the continent.

Good governance will make it possible for African countries to enhance intra-Africa trade, intra-African collaboration in Science and Technology and Africa's voice in the global

community. This will enable the continent to play a meaningful role to shape the nature of global political, social and economic relations.

The question for The African Academy of Sciences is how do we promote a paradigm shift in the approach to leadership and governance in Africa. At the end of the day the quality of public leadership matters.

Is the African Academy of Sciences ready to play its leadership role to help Africa to reimagine itself as a continent where poverty can be history?

Mamphela Ramphele

Active Citizen

7 November 2016