



25 April 2005

## **THE CASE FOR**

### **A VILLAGE-CENTRIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN AFRICA**

#### **A. THE CONCEPT**

A village-centric (or “village-first”) development approach in Africa, as propounded and promoted by the Chede international network, denotes a horizontal and human-focused strategy whereby the bulk of public investments and development services are oriented towards meeting the needs of the majority population living in villages. The strategy aims to level the existing disparities between Africa’s urban and so-called “rural sector”, which is in fact Africa’s village sector. “Rural development”, which embraces a wide range of concerns such as infrastructure and agricultural development, protection of the natural environment and wildlife preserves, or promotion of ecotourism in African countries, does not instantly convey the understanding that the process should be primarily geared towards improving the conditions of village inhabitants above all.

Village-centred development on the other hand more accurately captures the notion that village communities should be the main beneficiaries of rural development initiatives in Africa. This approach does not imply neglect of urban centres or of the macro level for that matter. Rather, it means that initial emphasis should be placed on modernizing Africa from its indigenous productive base that will sustain the nation state. In other words the fundamental principles of justice and the democratic right of all citizens to economic development and social inclusion should be applied in such a way that the village communities, currently representing about 70 per cent of Africa’s population, receive their proportionate share of public expenditures and services. Regrettably, however, the very opposite has happened in much of Africa since independence, to the extent that it is not even certain whether any data exist on how much public expenditure is devoted to the village sector .

In conceptual terms, the proposed strategy implies giving human meaning to the definition and finality of development in Africa. The approach defines development as a spatially-decentralised and sectorally-integrated process that earnestly fosters the cultural heritage, civic rights, and economic prosperity of all citizens at whatever station and cost. In this sense, development is not just about the “economic man”, material accumulation, worship of money, economic growth, macro-equilibrium, or glittering city skyscrapers for their own sake. More fundamentally, it should be about improving the quality of human life in all its facets and motivating creativity, particularly at the nuclear base of African societies.

In that context, there is reason to question the relevance to a village-centred approach of standard development theories coined until now for the region, from structural adjustment programmes of the eighties to current poverty reduction strategies for the heavily indebted developing countries (HIPC), which have been forced down the glut of African governments by international donor partners. African policy makers themselves appear by and large to have lost meaningful external and domestic control over the development strategies they implement. As evidence, Africa at present contributes precious little to the globalization processes shaping its destiny – political (especially within the United system of organizations), economic and financial (international financial institutions), and commercial and technological (the multilateral trading system and the sweep of the information and communication technology revolution. It is therefore an open question whether Africans will succeed in building a development strategy that could even remotely be called specifically and substantively African by virtue of its emphasis on the modernization of African villages – the vital missing link in development strategies

implemented to date. Is Africa losing an opportunity to create a civilization anchored in and powered by colourful villages?

In operational terms, a village-centred development approach encompasses two inter-related components. The first, rural development, is the physical and economic component. It covers, for example, the provision to the village communities of the same public goods and services typically available only in the cities at present, with emphasis on infrastructures such as transport and communication systems, water supply and electricity, social services - especially adequate quality and scope of healthcare, and technical and vocational education, agriculture and cottage industries. Also belonging here as a subcomponent, but almost always excluded in government rural sector development plans, is the physical planning and organizational requirements of village settlements, such as streets and street names, markets, leisure zones, cemeteries, etc. The extension and proper maintenance of those goods and services to the village level would make a major contribution to achieving the objective pursued by a village-centred development strategy.

However, for that objective to be attained optimally, a second, more substantive component is required, namely the cultural and institution building of Africa from its indigenous societal foundation as can still be found in the villages as opposed to the cities. This dimension includes, for example, revitalization and recording of indigenous knowledge systems, especially traditional technologies including traditional medicine and crafts; democratization and modernization of self-governing institutions such as village and clan chieftaincies and traditional councils; native languages; arts in general; ceremonial and other traditions. Although this heritage has been denigrated by Europeans and even the African elite since colonial times as “primitive” relics of the past, it ought in fact to constitute the marrow of the region’s modernization process. Thus, the goal in researching, recording, weeding, expanding, and adapting this indigenous value system to modern democratic times and technologies would be to ensure that it forms the fountain of Africa’s original and positive essence that feeds into the modern state-building process, from the nuclear-village level to other spheres of the continent.

A concrete example of the strategy being proposed for African countries is the Swiss federal system of state organization and governance. The strong democratic voice and institutions of the numerous Swiss villages (communes) within more-or-less sovereign local governments (cantons) guarantees one of the most horizontal and equitable distribution of national prosperity on earth. As a result, the Swiss population is widely and almost evenly spread over its territory so much so that very few Swiss cities have a resident population exceeding 500 000 inhabitants. In some cases it is difficult to make the distinction between city and village, particularly in terms of the standard quality of public goods and services available to city and village residents alike, including their household incomes. The entire Swiss countryside (its “rural sector”) is a majestic and peaceful scenery of green dotted by manicured village settlements. Most of the villages have kept intact and periodically put on public display their rich and centuries-old cultural traditions, unlike what is happening today in African villages. This horizontal strategy also has obvious payoffs in terms of national security and disaster risk reduction. Thus the Swiss constitutional and development experience, going back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, holds relevant lessons for Africa. In a nutshell, a village-centric development theory requires Africa to return to its original roots and start all over again to draw its modernization blueprint from ground zero upwards.

## **B. MERITS AND BENEFITS**

### **1. Breaking with the colonial pattern of modernization**

Prior to the European colonial occupation of Africa, the continent’s inhabitants lived mostly in a village universe. Although there were centres of commerce, they could hardly be described exactly as urban population centres, particularly since they did not systematically drain the countryside of its youthful productive force as witnessed today. City life and the urban-village growth polarity started at the height of the colonial experience. Public investments and infrastructure, including educational institutions and healthcare facilities, were progressively concentrated in urban areas that served as seats of administrative and economic organization of the colonies for the interests of the colonial powers and their metropolitan population.

Besides the growth of urban agglomerations, infrastructure development patterns in particular throughout the colonies, especially road and rail networks, were oriented to facilitate the exploitation and export of resources from the colonies, and not necessarily to advance the social and economic or even cultural wellbeing of the colonial population, which remained concentrated in the villages. While urban centres were planned, paved, electrified and supplied with other essential utilities, the village heartland was largely neglected. In this connection it is important to recall that the colonial powers did not follow in their home countries the same pattern of development that left their village communities to their own devices, nor did they implement it in those African territories where they had significant settler populations such as in Algeria, South Africa, or Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe). And one of the principal economic activities of the settler populations was agricultural production, which many African countries have tended to neglect since independence, precisely because of their marginalization of villages.

The modern education provided to Africans in most of the colonies was indeed highly valuable. Its purpose, however, was not to develop Africa from its nuclear value system, to be found intact in the villages, but to replace Africa's original knowledge systems and outlook with European values, lifestyle, and outlook. This process of Europeanization of Africans was obviously essential to the success of the colonial enterprise of command and control of the population and exploitation of natural resources. The strategy also ensured that enough Africans were trained to help with the administration and economic exploitation of the colonies. Replacing the African cultural and personality essence with a "civilized" European one, particularly in the French and Portuguese colonies, offered some assurance that the African leadership elite, the product of such Euro-centric education, would keep intact its umbilical cord to Europe – cultural, political, economic and technological. Which explains why the colonial pattern of development, which marginalized the majority population living in villages, continues to prevail and even to be reinforced decades after independence.

What then was the whole purpose of the bloody struggle for independence if the objective was simply to continue staking Africa's modernization on the colonial legacy? As such, a village-centric development strategy would radically break with the colonial hangover of urban-oriented development approach that continues to place more emphasis on abstract "economic fundamentals" than on the "human fundamentals" crying out for attention in destitute African villages. In other words, focusing modernization on village communities in priority is the surest way of recovering Africa's cultural and social footing – indispensable to a harmonious economic development pattern drawing sustenance from Africa's ancestral heritage.

## **2. A cure for Africa's split personality**

A village-centric development strategy has all the potential to cure Africa of its traditional-modern and village-urban dual reality inherited from the colonial period, and which continues to bedevil the continent's development to this day, working havoc on multiple levels and dimensions. At the psychological and attitudinal level, the villages and their inhabitants in most cases look condemned to exclusion. Being a "villager" is synonymous with being "primitive", "backward", illiterate, destitute, and so on. Since villagers are predominantly farmers, the derogatory connotations attaching to a villager equally apply to a farmer. It follows that the more education Africans receive, the less reason they have to live in their village, even after retirement from active duty.

This institutional and cultural contempt for the African village, villager and farmer is so ingrained in much of the "modern" African state that it has in fact come to be accepted by most villagers themselves as an "absolute truth". Not surprisingly, village parents actively encourage their educated sons and daughters to migrate from their village to live either in the cities (the "near-abroad") or in Europe and North America (the "real abroad") for psychological and economic reasons. The implication is that fewer and fewer able and educated youth are available in the village and therefore in the agricultural sector. The village population left behind is predominantly elderly and illiterate – certainly not the type of producer army to spark a green revolution in Africa. What all this means is a looming food insecurity crisis that could dangerously persist into the distant future unless drastic steps are taken to reverse this sinister trend. In fact the signs of such a crisis are already visible on the horizon even in some of the most unexpected places like central and southern Africa. Thus sidelining the village in the African development process could produce a ghastly mix of famines, humanitarian crises and even political breakdown. In the cultural

realm, the villagers have little reason to believe and feel that they have a role in the building of the modern African nation state. From the villagers' vantage point, the modern state is an alien machine. Few, if any, of its component parts have been sourced from Africa's indigenous material. How then can the villagers contribute anything useful to the strengthening and maintenance of the modern state system?

The same attitude applies to development programmes, which are typically loaded with rationalist Western approaches to organization and execution, complete with logical frameworks, rather than with the down-to-earth villagers' approaches to doing things. Consequently, the villagers are resigned to the role of passive and silent observers and, at times, casualties of such programmes wrought for them from above. The polarity is further visible in the absence or sorry state of infrastructure and services available to village settlements compared to the cities, a situation that further aggravates the villagers' sense of inferiority complex and resignation in the national development bargain. These are but a few examples of the multiple manifestations of the village-rural, traditional-modern cleft personality of the modern African state. This worsening divide has the cancerous potential to sink Africa's experiments with nation building. It would also be worth investigating if and how the collapse of agricultural systems anchored mostly in villages might have contributed or is still underwriting political upheavals and conflicts in several African countries. The ranks of rebel armies in many of Africa's civil conflicts consist of uprooted young villagers who should have been on the farms.

### **3. Recovering and using Africa's cultural heritage in nation building**

As emphasized earlier, Africa's cultural and institutional heritage is to be found in the village sector. That heritage currently faces three major threats. The first is that it had the serious drawback of being transmitted almost exclusively through oral tradition, from one generation to another. Although oral tradition was by no means unique to Africa's historical experience, the hard fact is that the region's multifaceted traditions are the least recorded by their authors in the world. The second major threat is that the majority of Africans still steeped in those traditions can neither read nor write, and are fast disappearing from the scene. The prospects are diminishing that their knowledge will be smoothly and wholly transmitted to future generations. The third threat is its very limited current role in the development of local and national institutions. Although many facets of that heritage have been the subject of academic works by anthropologists and ethnologists or doctoral students, their real-life applications or experimentation in African governance and development experience have been very limited indeed. The few exceptions that can be found in West Africa (e.g. Ashanti Kingdom) or East and Southern Africa, are certainly valuable and laudable, but they need to be more forward-looking and engage in a systematic process of further developing, extending, modernizing and deliberately disseminating this cultural heritage. Further, students and scholars of African history and traditional society and culture need to do much more in applied research work and sharing of findings.

A village-centric approach provides the avenue for applying the research findings of the academic community, in particular by building up and modernizing village nuclear institutions of self-government and economic and social organization understood and controlled by the village communities themselves. Developing successful governance and socio-economic institutions, including a modern leadership corps, at the micro (village) level should serve as entry point for building effective state institutions and leadership skills at all other levels. Thus, the proposed strategy poses the following central question: if Africans have not demonstrated that they can build efficient and effective democratic models of village governance as well as self-reliant service delivery systems responsive to their indigenous values, how can they possibly succeed to do that at the vastly more complex and abstract level of a modern nation state?

### **4. Implementing poverty-reduction strategies**

It is in the villages that the most disturbing symptoms of endemic poverty can be seen today in Africa. This reality appears to challenge the relevance to Africa of the successive commitments adopted for over a decade by the international community at United Nations global summits on social development or during the international decade for the eradication of poverty, and culminating with the United Nations Millennium Declaration in September 2000. While current international discourse, including virtually in all African countries, is about poverty reduction on the continent, the operational wheels of programmes supposed to reduce poverty are for the most part not rolling into Africa's village

heartland. How then can Africa be rid of poverty in its most crippling forms without implementing a village-centric approach to development?

### **5. Expanding agricultural production**

The predominant, and in many cases the only, meaningful economic activity in most African villages is agriculture, including livestock. Any agricultural development policy focused on small holders as distinct from big plantations should logically give priority to motivating the villager to ever-higher levels of output. The way to do that is to stimulate the villagers culturally, as earlier suggested, and concentrate public investments on building rural infrastructures and providing other development services, earlier mentioned, that raise the villagers' quality and standard of living, while at the same time stemming the flight to the cities of the vital labour force needed on the farms. It is doubtful if that can be achieved other than by a village-centric approach. Its salient benefits would include increased agricultural production to feed the urban centres and national industrialization ambitions while also reducing the need to use scarce resources on food imports. As such, African countries are today paying a high price in famines, famine threats and spreading hunger because their national development strategies have virtually bypassed the villages.

### **6. The solution for Africa's unbridled urbanization trends and slums**

The proposed strategy holds for the cities the fundamental benefit of reversing the current unbridled urbanization trends and spreading slums that scar the urban landscape and spawn as much crime as diseases. Giving priority to the villages should therefore rid the urban centres of their worst afflictions by reducing demographic pressures on limited and often crumbling city infrastructures. That in turn would remove the need for ever-increasing public investments in urban development projects, which worsen rather than solve the problems created by the present village-urban development divide. Accordingly, developing urban centres as the first priority is neither good for the cities themselves nor for the villages. But reversing the emphasis by giving priority to the village communities holds deep logic and salient benefits for Africa's villages, its cultural heritage, its cities and the nation as a whole, all ethnic groups equitably included.

Michael Njume-Ebong  
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