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Forget failed states, Africa could soon become the first 'failed continent'

By Keith Suter

Posted Friday, 8 August 2003

Are Africa's problems so deep-seated and systemic that the entire continent has few hopes for progress? This is not just a matter of a few countries (such as the current civil war in Liberia and Robert Mugabe's brutality in Zimbabwe) but issues that are so fundamental that the entire continent is in trouble.

Here are six fundamental issues that still remain unresolved.

First, there is the impact of European imperialism. The colonisers rearranged the indigenous systems of governance. For example they drew maps to fit their own convenience rather than the local realities. Europeans often took rivers as boundaries, whereas to Africans rivers were highways with relatives living either side of the water. Suddenly African tribes were split up and rearranged to fit the European maps. There are more than 50 countries carved out of a continent of over 200 tribes (depending on how the counting is done). There is often a lack of congruence between ethnic boundaries and national boundaries.

Second, there is the failure of Western-style democracy to take root. Western countries somehow assumed that they could impose a system of democracy on their soon-to-be independent colonies - without there being a culture of democracy to underpin it. Africans would like to hold their rulers accountable. But it takes a long time for a culture of democracy to emerge. In the Western countries such a culture did not emerge overnight; it was a long drawn-out process. Arguably the British experience began with the Magna Carta in 1215; and one person one vote did not come fully into effect until the early 20th century. Why should we expect the Africans to go at a faster rate?

Third, Africans are still lagging behind in their economic development. There is no shortage of raw materials in Africa. The problem is more one of a lack of an entrepreneurial culture. Africans are not lazy; they work hard. But the key issue is the shortage of entrepreneurs to develop businesses. Western countries took time to develop such an entrepreneurial culture. The east Europeans are also showing that the creation of an entrepreneurial culture does not develop overnight - even in countries that enjoyed a higher standard living and education (as a residue from the communist era).

Fourth, there is the question of whether the African countries are now so far behind that they can ever catch up. In much of Africa, poverty is pervasive. Almost nine out of ten people in Africa's poorest countries live on less than US\$2 per day. In Congo (potentially a country of great wealth), personal consumption among the poorest averages US\$0.38 per day. Such poverty cannot generate internal savings for investment and little consumption to encourage investment.

Additionally, Africa has little negotiating leverage in the international financial institutions (such as the World Bank), the international trade organizations (such as the World Trade Organization) and against transnational corporations. The collective gross national product for all of central Africa is about the size of Australia's. Its lack of economic leverage makes it vulnerable to exploitation, such as corporations seeking natural resources like oil. One of the reasons for the anger against oil corporations from local people is that they see little of the benefit of the exploitation coming back into their own area.

Foreign tourism is the continent's second-largest hard currency earner (after oil and gas). But many Africans must wonder if Westerners think more highly of elephants and gorillas than they do of humans: they attract more money.

Fifth, poor health is also a problem. One in three people is chronically undernourished. Somebody dies of AIDS every 13 seconds. AIDS is not only responsible for the reduction in the number of school-age children but also

for the premature death of a growing number of teachers. Not only single-teacher schools in rural areas but whole university departments run by local staff have had to be closed. AIDS is destroying Africa's chance of entering the knowledge economy.

Finally, Africa is slipping off the West's radar screen. Foreign aid to the continent is declining (as is the total provision of foreign aid to all developing countries). With the Cold War over, there is no longer any need for the great powers to use foreign aid to win friends and influence people. They no longer see any need to help Africa. Non-governmental organisations are doing their best in the face of public and governmental indifference.

President Bush has been the first serving US Republican president ever to visit Africa (this is an irony given that President Abraham Lincoln was a Republican). Perhaps this will signal more positive attention to the continent.

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