

DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY

*On Strengthening the Capacity of Parliaments and Political Parties to
Play a More Effective role in poverty reduction*

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Background

When most of Sub-Saharan Africa embraced multi-party rule in the early 1990s following decades of one party regimes and military dictatorships, there was indeed an understandable wave of renewed optimism and excitement about the prospects for development on the continent. The end of the cold war as well as the demise of state sanctioned apartheid in South Africa reinforced the hope that better prospects for peace and development on the continent had never been higher. As an observer so rightly noted “military dictatorships and one-party states especially in Africa had to reinvent themselves as multiparty democracies, or face international isolation or extreme pressure to change. Cawthra (2004:31) The continent was undoubtedly in bad shape, poverty levels were soaring, corruption was endemic, conflict had seriously destroyed the little infrastructure inherited from the colonial era in some countries, and the various governance systems could nether deliver development nor peace and security, or even guarantee human rights.

Two decades later, while a lot of progress has been recorded in a number of areas including the creation of democratic institutional infrastructure, better human rights climate, some modest economic growth etc, questions are being asked as to whether there is a link between democracy and development, its nature, and whether it is a causal one or not. This is because poverty continues to be on the increase in a number of African countries, the quality of life for many Africans is still a matter of concern, prompting policy makers, development partners and analysts to pause and wonder whether the expectations of the early 1990s about prospects for development

on the continent and the democratization wave that swept the continent were misplaced. Sub-Saharan Africa ‘has the highest incidence of poverty in the world, and unlike all other regions in the world, poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa has been rising over the last decade.’ (Economic Commission for Africa Report: 2005: This is attributable mainly to jobless growth in many countries, as well as the deep inequalities in the distribution of major assets which persist. In addition due to realities of globalization, “many African countries have been forced to open up their economies and, being primarily commodity exporters, they have consequently found themselves in a spiraling race to the bottom as each nation competes against others to provide lower standards, reduced wages and cheaper resources for corporations and richer nations.” (Venter and Neulands (2005:122) This has further worsened the poverty problems on the continent.

While many countries are still struggling to deepen their democracies and enhance their quality and impact, there is increasing evidence of declining levels of trust of democratic institutions including parliaments and political parties. The low delivery of some of the governments has fueled the rise of populist regimes and the role of external powerful influences such as globalization, trade protectionism and others have led to a perception that domestic democratic processes do not matter after all. The deepening North/South polarization has also provided ‘excuses’ for those who are against multiparty democracy as they have tried to promote the notion that it is actually just a Western construct and that the idea of human rights is a ploy to maintain a structural status quo that has undermined the interests of the South.

The above questions and concerns come in the context of further arguments where some look towards China and Russia as some of the examples which illustrate that greater wealth does not necessarily translate into greater political freedom. (see for example, Bruce Bueno de Mosquita and George W. Downs: 2005) The fact that all developed and richest countries are democratic fueled the expectation that democracy and development will always coexist in the same space and in fact that there could even be a causal link between them. As Bueno and Downs have so aptly summed it up, “the argument in its simplest form goes like this – economic growth produces an educated and entrepreneurial middle class that sooner or later, begins to demand control over its own fate. Eventually even repressive governments are forced to give in...Authoritarian regimes all around the world are showing that they can reap the benefits of economic development while evading any pressure to relax their political control.”

It is not clear whether this matter will ever be resolved one way or the other and how soon this could be particularly because evidence is mixed and almost contradictory. It may not be easy to prove causality in this case but a relationship between the two does exist. It is obvious that development cannot take place under conditions of instability, war, or even major conflict. It is also a fact that democracy is the only system known today which can generate conditions of peace and security and sustain them. I would therefore want to emphasize a point I made at the IDEA conference last year that “democratic regimes are more likely to come up with policies that are reflective of the will of the people. (Somolekae:2007) These policies provide the environment and context for development to take place. It is very

important to underscore the fact that if we are interested in a people driven development, then, perhaps no other form of governance known today can deliver this better than a multiparty democratic framework that is geared towards the promotion of human rights. As Matlosa, Elklit and Chiroro (2006) have so rightly observed, “Democracy is a fundamental prerequisite for development, peace and security In Africa.”

If we agree that democracy is essential in order to create the conditions necessary for development, we need to explain why despite the fact that many countries on the African continent embraced multiparty democracy for close to two decades now, development still remains a challenge. We need to elaborate also on what we mean by development.

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT: EPLORING THE LINKANGE

Democracy is usually just defined as rule of the people by the people. This is a very simple but enduring definition which continues to capture and express virtually all the key attributes of democracy. The key institutional infrastructure such as the legislature, judiciary and executive are found in virtually all of them. In a democracy, political authority and legitimacy are derived from the people. They are acquired through a competitive process of selecting of leadership which is both participatory and inclusive. Elections have become the most commonly used method of selecting leaders in a democracy. Elections themselves are not synonymous with democracy but they are a very important aspect of democratic rule. Of critical importance to

this competition are political parties. These actors compete to hold political office and they remain a vital instrument for aggregating and channeling the political aspirations and wishes of the people into the political system.

A number of countries have made very significant progress in terms of institutionalizing democratic rule on the continent. However there is also evidence that the continent still has to do more in order to consolidate the democratic gains made, and to ensure that the democratic momentum so far created is sustained. It is evident that the process of reinventing themselves from one party or military dictatorships has not been a smooth one indeed and a number of factors point to this. First of all, while formal institutions of democracy exist, many people particularly in rural areas are still to be educated and informed about the modern system of governance and how it is supposed to be of service to them. Thus, there is a mindset problem where those who are led still fail to practically appreciate and access the rights and freedoms provided in their constitutions, while on the other hand some leaders fail to appreciate the true meaning of leadership in a democratic setting, as its implications for accountability.

Many people, including leaders in many parts of Africa still equate democracy to casting of the ballot. Thus democracy remains confined to formal political processes a fact which has prompted Dr Matlosa (2006) to rightly conclude that “the fact that democracy is limited to formal political processes also suggests that it faces challenges for advancing socio-economic development.” (p57) In addition, many leaders on the continent still find it incredibly difficult to hand over power peacefully as provided for in their constitutions. If they do, they would either try to continue

dominating their ruling parties or just running them from outside. Thus Calderisi (2006) has somewhat dramatised this problem by noting that “some of these transfers of power have seldom been easy in Africa; many have been savage, others comical.” (p.69) Thus free and fair election contests are still work in progress on the continent and resisted in some of the countries. The Kenya election early this year demonstrated tragically the depth of this misfortune. Because of the above, it is not surprising to note that post election violence continues to haunt some parts of Africa, and most importantly, to note that many Africans do not link their general welfare and situation to the vote nor feel empowered to use it to express their will.

Yet in order to consolidate and strengthen our democratic systems on the continent, people need to be educated about this new system and how it can be of service to them. To the many Africans, particularly in rural areas, traditional systems of governance remain central to their lives and more relevant compared to the fine institutions at the central or national level. Strong democracies on the continent are those which have build modern systems on traditional ones to ensure that what people understand is modernized and made to work for them. The Kgotla system in Botswana is a good illustration of this.

THE DEVELOPMENT SCENE ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

The meaning of development has evolved over time and so have the development paradigms and approaches. There was a time when

development was seen as synonymous with economic growth. Not much concern was put into how the fruits of such development were distributed. Today, a lot has changed. Since the ground breaking essay of Dudley Seers in the 1960s, development has been defined much more broadly to include the question of the quality of life of people. Seers had argued that in evaluating a country's progress towards development, we should ask what has been happening to poverty, inequality and the general quality of life of the people. He concluded that if these indicators were not on the decline, then it would not be appropriate to talk about development.

Today, it is known also that not only can growth not generate the employment necessary for the job seekers the quality of such employment sometimes leaves a lot to be desired. This is particularly true in poor African countries where the skills levels are also quite low. Not only is quality of life important, concern today is on human development. Development is also about the respect for human rights and the creation of equitable and inclusive systems of governance.

Within the above context, this paper focus on how to strengthen the capacity of democratic institutions such as parliaments and political parties in developing policy proposals geared towards sustainable development and effective poverty reduction.

PARLIAMENTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT

In 2005 the Economic Commission for Africa published a report whose theme was **Striving for Good Governance in Africa**. Among its most important recommendations are that the capacity of parliaments in Africa should be strengthened so as to enable them to perform their core functions and most importantly so that they can improve their operational effectiveness. This is because legislatures in many parts of Africa remain weak and ineffective and thus marginalized in the day to day governance of their countries. The report noted that "their autonomy, though guaranteed by the constitutions is often compromised by the executive through lobbying, financial inducements and even intimidation." (p26)

This report was followed in 2006 by another key publication of the SADC parliamentary- Civil Society Engagement Handbook edited by Tim Hughes which concluded among others that "Parliament, and committees in particular, cannot and will not be taken seriously by the executive branch unless they prove themselves to be well informed, well researched, proactive and constructive in their engagement with ministerial departments." (p.36)

Similar sentiments have been expressed in the Africa-i-Parliaments which is an initiative of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. In their 2008 report, the issue of the lack of effectiveness of parliaments in holding the executive accountable is discussed further highlighting all the other major issues highlighted by other actors and observers. There are a number of regional and sub-regional networks which seek to among others that parliaments on the continent perform effectively. These include the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the East African Legislative Assembly, the SADC-Parliamentary Forum and the Economic Community of West African States Community parliament (ECOWAS-PC). One role played by these parliamentary networks is that “they promote globalized parliamentary-based democracy by developing the capacity of parliamentarians regardless of their ideological orientation.”

(International IDEA 2007:76)

These concerns with parliaments and their performance underscore the very key role that parliaments have within a democratic setup. The role of any parliament in a democracy is to promote democratic participation in the democratic process. The democratic core business of parliament is to exercise oversight over the executive branch of government. This is parliaments’ legitimate function one that should be exercised effectively. This is key to ensuring public accountability and it is the cornerstone of good governance.

Within this area, a lot of progress has been made. However there are concerns that the ability of parliaments in Africa to exercise their oversight functions are limited by a number of factors some internal within parliaments while others are due to a constraining environment which is not allowing this key institution to independently and effectively discharge its functions. It has to be noted though that in practice, these factors tend to be reinforcing. The following are some of the factors which hinder the effectiveness of parliaments in exercising their duties;

- First of all the legacy of the culture of the one party era or military dictatorship period is such that it is still difficult to accept at a practical level the exercise of this function. The culture of institutional tensions and criticism from other structures is still viewed by some governments with suspicion. As a commentator has observed with respect to the SADC region, “in many SADC countries, attempts to exercise oversight are regarded as unpatriotic, disloyal, disrespectful or even treacherous. There is very little acceptance of the necessity of a healthy institutional tension between the executive and legislative branches for representative democracy to remain vital and vibrant.” (Hughes:2006:5)

- Due to the political culture from the past, there isn't a strong culture in Africa for civil society and parliament to interact in fact this is in part a part of the legacy of the past where the relationship between government and civil society was characterized by distance and outright confrontation and conflict. Thus some have dubbed this state of affairs "institutional elitism and chauvinism" in order to underscore a tendency for MPs to be regarded with high reverence and then stay out of touch with the public as in civil society. It is indeed key to ask whether or not many of these parliaments are relevant institutions to those they serve.
- Most likely as a result of how they are viewed by governments, some parliaments end up being under resourced and therefore ineffective. Although constitutionally they have to deal with serious policy issues and legislation which require that they should be adequately informed, this is not so. Many do not even have sufficient library and research facilities in order to be able to enhance their effectiveness.
- Due to this and other weaknesses, sometimes parliaments are not taken seriously by the executive. Despite being the representatives of the people, sometimes they are not consulted when major international protocols are signed. They ultimately focus on critiquing what they barely understand further undermining their own credibility before the executive.

It cannot be denied that in situations where the above weaknesses are present, there is no way that parliament will be able to monitor the performance of the executive and to keep it in check. Such checks would have to be exercised over a number of ways such as through budget analysis and scrutiny, policy analysis and to ensure that parliaments play a greater role in drawing up policies to address specific problems in society. In addition, part of this oversight has to include monitoring of policy implementation to ensure that decisions are implemented and that what is agreed in parliament is put into practice. In this way the will of the people as expressed through the composition of parliament will be realized. The many policy frameworks designed to address poverty in Africa are no exception.

Members of parliament are mostly from political parties. In many parliaments in Africa, the independent members of parliament would be quite few. These members are coming into parliament from political parties. The political party as an instrument of collective action is a very important institution in a democracy. This institution has evolved like other institutions of democracy in Africa, some have even become more democratic internally and even run primary elections to elect members. Political parties get voted into parliament presumably because of their policy positions on a number of issues. This includes theoretically, policy positions on how they will tackle poverty. Unfortunately, although this is theoretically or formally the case, there is no evidence to suggest that voters have reached that

level of understanding where they connect their vote and its potential power with their needs and how they can achieve it.

A number of weaknesses of political parties have been evident over the years and are well documented. (see for example, Salih and Nordlund, 2006; Matlosa,2007: Chege 2007 etc). This interest in researching the contribution of political parties to the growth and consolidation of Africa has gained currency in the last few years. A lot of this work has been led by the International IDEA. Much of the earlier interest was on elections and on understanding how the other institutions are functions. It has become clear that African democratic project will be strengthened by an equal emphasis on political parties because of their significance in the political life of democratic nations.

A number of shortcomings of political parties have been noted. First of all is the caliber of some of the people they field to run for political office. While the challenges of development and oversight duties of Members of parliament demand understanding of how economies function and how resources can be mobilized, and so forth, democratic credentials within parties use a different yardstick and provide representatives some of whom do not have the understanding. This is part of the reason why quite often in parliament governments are consistently at odds with members of parliament over policy choices, not only because the former dominate the policy choice selection process, but also because the later are not really following what is going on. Secondly some parties do not even have offices nor facilities even to craft relevant policy positions on a number of issues. Thus their approach

may just be piecemeal and uninformed on key issues. This contributes to them being marginalized by the executive or outright ignored.

THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY: WHICH WAY FORWARD?

Although parliaments and political parties occupy a key position in the democratic landscape of democratic countries, we have noted that in Africa their role is hampered by a number of factors most of which hinge on the state of democracy on the continent itself. The same reasons that work against the effectiveness of parliaments in providing oversight on a number of issues are also relevant for the poverty eradication role. Although democracy provides the possibility that the wishes and felt needs of people can be responded to by their government, much of that depends on whether or not such governments interact enough and develop such policies following due consultation with their people. This is particularly relevant for the poverty and development area because experience from the last so many decades shows very well that the power to develop people and to take them out of poverty does not lie with governments or donors or bureaucrats. This power lies with the people themselves and sustainable models of reducing poverty which seek to do anything else will keep failing.

Parliaments and political parties play a limited role in the poverty reduction field in many African countries for a number of reasons. First of all, it has to be noted that when many of these countries stepped out of the military dictatorships and one party era to embrace democratic reforms, and took on the challenge of reinventing themselves as democracies, for many of these a key policy framework that soon had to be implemented in order to address development challenges and fight poverty was the now famous Structural Adjustment Programs. Governments found themselves on the defensive as some of the adverse consequences of these reforms brought about hardship and heightened political

tensions. Parliamentarians, civil society and others, fired from the opposite side of the isle indicating that many political actors in these countries did were not part of these reforms and did not like them on the basis of their noted side effects. This is the same way in which parliaments and politics parties find themselves on the outside as the donor community and governments work out policies and have to only bring these institutions after. This happens because of the very large dependency of some of these countries on donor financing in order to run their programs. In countries such as Mozambique, Lesotho or even Malawi governments depend on this help for more than 50 percent of their resources. It is hard for a government that is so dependent on outside help to also be able to totally control its policy agenda. The Poverty Reduction Strategies, (PRSPs) Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) are some of the most significant policy interventions introduced in order to fight poverty. PRSPs were highly consultative in some of the countries (e.g. Lesotho) but like other non-home grown initiatives, people still need to be taught about what they are about and what they mean for their daily lives. Closer to home in Southern Africa, the SADC Indicative Strategic Plan and the African Union's NEPAD framework are all important frameworks. However, the point we seek to make here is that parliaments keep trailing behind and having to catch up in terms of knowledge and information. This includes political parties.

It is no wonder poverty continues to be on the increase on the African continent. While much of the problem rightly emanates from factors outside Africa within the international economic system, it is also highly evident that the people in the form of parliaments and political parties still have to be brought into the center of fighting the war on poverty. This is not only about giving parliaments information, it is also about ensuring that the political institutions and how they work ensure that people themselves take charge of their own development. The current practice where both in terms of building democracies and seeking to drive the process of development, nations are focusing on building from the centre or national level is not bearing fruit. As Prof. M. Rukuni (2007) has so rightly noted in his latest book on Being Afrikan, this is almost the same as attempting to build a house from the roof. It is not happening.

On the basis of the points and challenges noted above, it is important to realize that there will be no easy solution to this problem as some of the solutions necessary require political solutions and hence great compromises to be made. A number of possible solutions to be tried include the following;

- Strengthen the role of the parliaments in the national governance system by ensuring that their constitutional roles are performed and that the executive commits to respecting this institution. Undermining parliaments denies people a change to be heard in a democracy.
- Strengthen the capacity of parliaments to perform their roles better. The operational efficiency of these institutions must be improved. Training for parliamentarians is necessary.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that both government and the population at large are educated about the role of this institution.
- Strengthen the interaction between parliament and civil society and establish a culture of accessibility of this institution to the public. In this regard some have even suggested the formation of a parliament civil society forum.
- Greater efforts should be made to build the capacity of political parties to not only reach out to the people and get to be more effective in their interest aggregation role, but they must be encouraged to build the necessary infrastructure for them to function as credible entities that can even be entrusted to govern. Some are in a state that leaves a lot to be desired. Part of the problem here in building the political party as an institution emanates from the fact that while ruling parties find it easier to mobilize resources and even use state resources at times to further their own party functions, the private sector in many African countries equate funding the ruling party with strengthening democracy. While they do this in order to ensure economic benefits from state business, they also undermine their own future by assisting to concentrate power in one center and thus weaken democratic prospects. This must be discussed as a public challenge requiring a solution.
- Political parties have to finally realize that the era has passed when they could just field lower caliber candidates and improve in this respect. Otherwise they will

continue to marginalize by the executive as they bring forward people who hardly understand what is going on or what their role should be.

- Both parliaments and political parties have to strive to ensure that they bring in women and the youth in their mainstream leadership structures because it is these groups that are most highly affected by poverty and who should become part of an effort to find a solution to this problem.

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