

Perceptions on Leadership in Africa

EON SMIT

To generalise about any aspect of Africa, borders on the impossible – an approximate population of 930 million people distributed over 30 million square kilometres, populating 61 countries that stretch between 20 square kilometres to 2.5 million square kilometres with the number of inhabitants ranging from approximately 4 000 to 140 million and earning per capita incomes varying between \$600 to \$50,000 USD. There are 26 official languages and 44 different currencies. Within national borders, further diversity is introduced by tribal loyalties, language differences, different religions and to an increasing extent, class differences based on individual wealth.

Generalisations about the characteristics of Africans, therefore, have to be treated with circumspect. Africa shares all the problems associated with statistical averages when dealing with widely dispersed observations. It is not necessarily representative of any specific country and holds the risk that judgements on leadership in a particularly progressive country may be contaminated with observations from war-disrupted dictatorships. A further mistaken inference would be that, because we inhabit a common continent, we should have a great deal in common with all other Africans. It has been said that the only really common experience of Africans, is that of being colonial subjects, which is hardly sufficient to perpetuate eternal solidarity, especially amongst younger people exposed to a global lifestyle through modern media.

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However, the reality of Africa is clearly depicted in a satellite photo of the world at night showing Africa as a dark continent in a world brightly lit up by electricity. The Afro-pessimist will see behind this image the most uncompetitive region in the world, characterised by poverty, disease, corruption, political instability, the lack of basic infrastructure and the unwillingness or inability of leaders to frame and execute policies that will enable sustainable human development.

An Afro-optimist will probably see the embryo of the economic giant that Africa can become, realising that the renaissance will take a very long time to deliver on its promises and that it will be characterised by small beginnings first confined to development nodes and crucially dependent on the initiative, effort and leadership of a small minority in politics, business and society, similar to the European renaissance, but this time around playing out in a planned and purposeful way.

Rather than drawing conclusions from a static image, the optimist will probably study the evolution of the African picture over time in order to identify those process signals that bode well for the future. Clearly identifiable examples become observable throughout the continent with ever increasing frequency. A cursory stocktaking will, inter alia, take cognisance of a handful of new generation political leaders who clearly respect democratic principles and understand the preconditions

for sustainable development which culminate in strong economic growth; a significant reduction in the number of civil conflicts; the acknowledgment that Africa has to take responsibility for its own future through joint policy and action as espoused by *The New Partnership for Africa's Development* (NEPAD); and the acceptance of the Millennium Goals as well as the strong international investment in African countries since they have taken the initiative to encourage investment. There is also evidence that African leaders are challenging corruption while understanding that transparency and accountability are necessary preconditions for development. This way of thinking is gaining both momentum and popular support. Further evidence support the Afro-optimist position that a new professional middle-class of business leaders is emerging in Africa. Having received a good education outside of Africa many young people have returned to start their own businesses or to join global conglomerates. They respect hard work and international excellence and exert strong local influence – to the effect that they had sufficient influence to bring the violence after the recent Kenyan elections to a halt. Enlightened business leaders triumphed over selfish politicians.

A leading Afro-optimist, Dr Reuel Khoza,¹ argues that the locus of control for Africa's future is within the continent itself and that the African renaissance will be driven by leadership that in the African spirit of Ubuntu, will keep people in authority ever mindful of their role of servers rather than commanders. The server leader leads by the tenets of consultation, persuasion, accommodation and cohabitation and shuns coercion and domination. These principles are deeply imbedded in African humanism and are part of the old traditions of tribes and regions. African humanism, he argues, promotes social cohesion through its search for sufficient consensus that leads to a process of social arbitrage in the settling of differences. This leadership paradigm is practical and compassionate and it calls for the development of leaders who can deliver rather than merely promise and who demonstrate great personal integrity, accompanied by expertise and organisational ability.

Professor Jimnah Mbaru,² banker, stockbroker and Afro-optimist, in a more pragmatic way, calls for leadership that can mobilize the competitive forces on the continent to allow Africa to play in the global arena of brainpower and technology, rather than merely be involved in resource exports. He sees the leadership challenge as creating less government and better government, anchored in a fully participating democracy, protected property rights, good governance by technocrats, strong public-private partnerships and entrepreneurship entrenched in small and flexible, fast-working companies.

IBM, an Afro-optimist company, has researched the leadership challenges facing Africa focusing on innovations capable of leapfrogging current technologies and thus propelling the continent into a domain where it can compete with the rest of the world on the basis of creativity as well as cost. They conclude that African leaders have to:

- capture more value from the continent's vast resource pool through labour intensive beneficiation processes

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- make a massive investment in transport, energy and information and telecommunications technology
- fully exploit the economic opportunities of the vibrant mobile phone industry
- tap into the economic power of the informal sector and enable this sector to become mature and formal

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image courtesy: photos.com

- empower African women in adequate and appropriate ways to take their rightful place as born entrepreneurs
- be innovative when it comes to financing small business and entrepreneurs; enable social entrepreneurship to supplant government funded NGOs in the long run, and lastly
- assure the development and upgrade of skills, and the accompanying development of managerial and leadership competencies of Africans which are necessary requirements for the continent's development.³

It is common cause that Africa's once-venerable higher-learning institutions are in disarray after more than four decades of financial neglect. Available funds were channelled into primary education, thus further stimulating demand for higher learning in a system with decreasing capacity. Business schools are a case in point. There are more than 350 so-called business schools on the continent. However, at the time of the formation of the African Association of Business Schools, certain minimum criteria for membership were set – 10 full time faculty including four staff members with doctoral degrees, 400 hours of MBA teaching per year, a \$2000 minimum fee for the MBA and some research publications per year etc. To date, only nine non-South African schools in Sub-Saharan Africa successfully applied for membership. In South Africa only 19 MBA programmes have received government accreditation. Only five schools in Africa hold any form of international quality accreditation.

A very clear case for action can be made here. In Africa the need for leadership education undoubtedly exceeds the supply. Compared to India and China, where the economic development is strongly underpinned by leadership and management development, the African market represents the last untapped Western frontier for the world's business schools. Unfortunately, after independence, African countries were flooded by individuals and organisations of poor repute, the so-called Uhuru hunters, selling goods, services and advice into unsophisticated markets – frequently delivering very little, which today still cast doubts on the intentions of well-meaning institutions. However, those business schools in the world that are looking for new markets, wish to contribute to meaningful leadership development and show a willingness to attune their education to the peculiar characteristics of a new environment, will experience friendly receptions leading to meaningful partnerships and students hungry for a high-quality education, usually willing to pay, but at times limited in their ability to afford international fees.

Getting involved may be a strong indicator of a business school's resolves to support a global leadership initiative in a very real sense, especially in Africa.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eon Smit
Professor and Director
University of Stellenbosch Business School, South Africa

Email: eon.smit@usb.ac.za
