

**From Theory to Practice:  
Exploring Sustainable Solutions to Africa’s Developmental Challenges**

by  
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**i) Introduction**

Thank you for the generous introduction. First of all, I feel honored to be delivering the keynote address for this 2<sup>nd</sup> annual conference of the African Graduate Students Association. It’s just been 3 years since I was a graduate student like you. I recall several discussions with my colleagues, some of them are here with us, about creating a forum for discussion and action on issues of concern to Africa. I was therefore excited and pleased to learn of the formation of AGSA. So, at their recent meeting, I promised to assist the group as best as I can. Little did I know the executives were listening and would take me up on my words and entrust me with this huge but reputable responsibility of delivering a keynote address today. But I am thankful to your leadership for the honor done me and the great job they have done so far to move AGSA forward. They really deserve commendation.

**ii) Theme**

I have been asked to speak on the theme “**From Theory to Practice: Exploring Sustainable Solutions to Africa’s Developmental Challenges**”. This is indeed an important theme given the circumstances Africa finds itself now and I believe there is no better forum to address this than among young African scholars like you who represent the future and the promise of Africa.

For a long time, Africa’s development has been a paradox from the standpoint that the continent is the most resource-rich but home to the world’s largest poor population. Therefore, Africa has been the focus of many development efforts for the past several decades. But too often, we find the practices and the results on the ground to be at variance with the theories guiding them and the expected outcomes. It is in this light that I find today’s discussions about how to make solutions to Africa’s development challenges sustainable an important topic

In addressing this theme, I believe it is critical to understand the relationship between theories and practice to gain insights into why theories may not always translate into practice.

Generally, theories are a set of principles or accepted facts on which practices of an activity are based. They are models based on what the proponent of the theory (theorist) knows about the phenomenon. For theories to seamlessly translate into practice, the assumptions undergirding the theory need to be closer to the reality as much as possible. Therefore, as new information about a phenomenon become available, the theory is revised to bring it closer to the reality as possible.

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Applying this to Africa's development, it can be argued that development theories will not translate well into practice in Africa if they are disconnected from Africa's realities. This disconnection between theories and practice may come from two main interrelated sources: 1. Theorist's limited understanding of Africa's sociocultural, political and economic context and 2. The lack of feedback from recipients, or the provision of wrong feedback from recipients to help with the theory's refinement. For those of us in the social science research, we often encounter people who will give you socially desirable answers, which do not help to revise the theory. **(When people are called upon to provide input or respond to surveys attempting to understand our issues, they provide answers they think person would like to hear)**

Based on this understanding of the theory-practice relationship, I will share with you, today, a few thoughts on how to make solutions to Africa's development challenges sustainable, and roles that young African scholars can play to make this a reality. I will begin with the key messages:

First, sustainable solutions to African development challenges must recognize the changing economic landscape of Africa. Africa's economic landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade and half in ways that solutions based on 1970/80s conditions may not fit into current realities. I will attempt to highlight some of these changes.

Second, there are emerging mega-trends that are shaping and will shape Africa's future economic trajectories. These trends present challenges but also represent opportunities for rapid economic transformation on the continent and hence, need to be accounted for in our search for solutions that will last into the future.

Third, sustainable solutions to Africa's development challenges need to be Africa-led and driven by Africans, inclusive and people-centered, build on Africa's strength and be environmentally friendly. I will attempt to expand a bit on each of these elements in my talk.

Lastly, from a development theory standpoint, African scholars, such as you and I, have two key roles to play in order to help develop sustainable solutions. First, as individuals with a sociocultural understanding of Africa's conditions, we have a responsibility to translate existing development theories into African development context and provide valuable feedback to refine the development theories to reflect Africa's reality. Along with that, we are also uniquely placed to develop new theories of African development that are grounded in an understanding of Africa's conditions and build on the resources available on the continent.

Now I will attempt to develop these points.

### **iii) Africa's changing landscape**

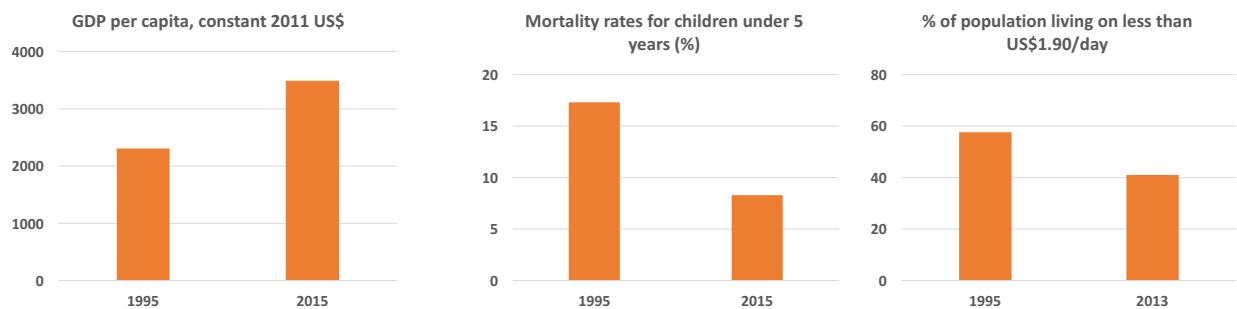
The cover pages of the Time Magazine provide a good illustration of how Africa's economic landscape has changed over time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the captions on Time Magazine regarding Africa were ones of coups, conflict, corruption, and agony.

Now, when we fast forward to 2011, we see an image of an Africa that is rising from its dark periods of stagnation to the extent that is acknowledged by both the Time Magazine and The Economist.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, over the past decade and a half, Africa has recorded impressive economic growth. The continent was home to six of the ten fastest growing economies in the world in the 2000s, and several African countries recorded GDP growth rates above 5% during the period (The Economist 2011). Even in the wake of the global financial crisis, African economies demonstrated a much stronger resilience compared to the world economy, recording GDP per capita growth of about 3 percent in 2010 while that of the world declined by 1.4 percent (IMF, 2013)

This growth has impacted income levels and reduced poverty. GDP per capita at constant 2011 prices in US dollars for SSA increased from about US\$2308 to about US\$3488 between 1995 and 2015, while the share of the population living below US\$1.90 declined from about 58% in 1995 to about 41% in 2013 (World Bank 2015).

**There has also been an improvement in non-monetary measures of welfare.** Primary school completion rates for children have increased from about 50% in 1991 to about 68% in 2014 and the gender gap in educational attainment is narrowing. Africa’s present workforce is the most educated cohort the continent has witnessed in history. In the health sector, child mortality and morbidity are declining due to improvement in quality and access to health care. Mortality rate for children under 5 years declined from 17% to 8% between 1995 to 2015 (World Bank 2015)



Source: Author’s computed from World Bank, WDI (2015)

There is also evidence of a rapid but highly variable shifts in the labor force from farming to off-farm sectors over the past decade in most African countries as part of the on-going economic transformation (Yeboah and Jayne, 2017; Macmillan *et al.*, 2014). However, the absolute number of people engaged in farming is rising and farming remains the largest single employer of the labor force employing about 70% of the labor force.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/africa-rising-time-runs-with-same-title-as-now-famous-the-economist-cover/>

There are two important caveats to note about Africa's economic resurgence. First, the progress is not evenly distributed across African countries. Some countries like Ghana, Rwanda, Ethiopia have done better than others like Somalia and South Sudan. Second, the progress over the past decade and a half has not undone the years of damage from those long periods of economic and political stagnation. Needless to say, several challenges remain.

The number of people living in poverty remains unacceptably high. The absolute number of people living in poverty has increased from 280 million in 1994 to 330 million in 2013 (World Bank, 2015). The continent still lags behind other regions at all educational levels. More than 2 in 5 adults in SSA are illiterate and there are rising concerns about the quality of education students are receiving especially in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and entrepreneurship fields (Filmer and Fox, 2014). We still have 1 in 12 children in SSA dying before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. That is one too many (World Bank 2015).

Nonetheless, these few examples about Africa's changing landscape demand a critical review of the existing theories developed in the 80s and 90s to ensure they are consistent with the realities of 2017 if the solutions they profess will be sustainable.

#### **iv) Megatrends shaping Africa's economy**

At the same time, there are new and emerging trends that present additional challenges or opportunities for future economic growth, which I believe African policymakers need to be cognizant of in our search for sustainable solutions. I will highlight a few of them here:

##### *a. Rapid population expansion and youth bulge*

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has the world's youngest and fastest growing population. Sixty-two percent of the population is below the age of 25 and the subcontinent's share of the global population is projected to rise from about 12% in 2015 to 22% in 2050, and 36% by the turn of the century (United Nations, 2017). With a labor force growing roughly at three percent per year, over 11 million young Africans will be added to the labor market each year until 2035 (Losch, 2012). Where will these young people be employed?

**Will African economies be able to generate enough well-paying jobs to absorb this growing labor force to reap a demographic dividend or is this a time bomb waiting to explode? We have already seen the negative effects of this youth bulge manifest in the Arab Spring, piracy in Somalia's Gulf of Aden and the recent waves of xenophobia in South Africa.**

##### *Rising urban food demand and food import bill*

The continent is also experiencing growing domestic and regional demand for food, especially processed food and food products with differentiated quality including meat, fruits, and vegetables, which offers enormous potential for value addition (Tschirley *et al.*, 2015). However, the low productivity nature of Africa's agriculture and food production systems have constrained the region's ability to respond adequately to this

rising demand. As a result, the region is increasingly reliant on food imports. In fact, Africa's food import bill has risen from US\$6 billion in 2001 to US\$45 billion in 2014 – a seven-fold increase in 13 years (RENAPRI, 2017). Not only is this rising food import bill contributing to budget deficits, it also represents a lost opportunity to create jobs for millions of Africans in agribusinesses.

*b. Changing farmland ownership and distribution patterns*

The last decade has also witnessed a rising interest in Africa's arable land both from international investors and local-based African investors. This has led to a rise in medium and large-scale farms, which now account for a sizeable and rising portion of total farmland in many African countries (Jayne *et. al.* 2016). Consequently, land scarcity and cost of land are both rising, limiting access to land by certain demographics especially the youth. In Ethiopia for instance, lack of access to farmland is cited as a key factor for the youth exit from agriculture (Bezu and Holden, 2014). What are the implications of this rising land scarcity on the future of smallholder agriculture?

*c. Climate Change*

Lastly, there is also the threat of climate change. Africa is projected to suffer greater effects from climate change than any other parts of the world (IPCC). The continent is projected to experience decreases in rainfall and high temperatures, particularly in the already arid regions of Eastern and Southern Africa. In West Africa, the countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria all face water scarcity by 2025. These changes will severely impact agriculture and the livelihoods of the millions of smallholder farmers who are dependent on rain-fed agriculture and hence subject to the vagaries of the weather. Sadly, not much effort has been directed to mitigation and adaptation to the threats of climate change to Africa. Environmental degradation persists at high rates and support for climate action remains very low.

**These megatrends while challenging are by no means inevitable. African governments and policymakers have the ability to bend them in socially desirable ways. The success of future development efforts will depend on how well the solutions respond to these emerging mega-trends facing the continent.**

**v) Sustainable solutions to Africa's development challenges need to be Africa-led and driven by Africans, inclusive and people-centered, build on Africa's strength and be environmentally friendly**

*a. Africa-led and driven by Africans*

Solutions to Africa's developmental challenges will be sustainable if Africans takes greater ownership of their own development. There is no country or region of the world that has ever been developed by foreign actors alone. It always takes the collective effort of the citizenry to harness the resources they have, sometimes with help from development partners, to improve their lives.

The notion of Africa-led development efforts seems to be gathering steam among many in the development world including our own MSU's Alliance for African Partnership

whose activities are centered on providing models for Africa-led partnership to co-create solutions to Africa's development challenges. The World Bank also acknowledges that expatriate technical assistance has not been very effective. In a 2007 study, the World Bank concluded that technical assistance in the form of agricultural policy reform primarily by external analysts has been among the least effective form of development assistance to Africa. The bank is now gradually shifting focus to capacity building of local institutions to take leadership in formulating solutions.

There is already greater local expertise, awareness, and insistence on Africa-led development over the past decade and some of these offer glimmers of hope. In 2003, the African Union (AU) Summit in Maputo, launched the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program (CAADP), Africa's policy framework which provides a set of guidelines for countries to review their own situations and identify investment opportunities with optimal impacts and returns. Initial indications suggest that countries that adhered to this Africa-led prescription are reaping the benefits of faster declines in poverty and rapid economic growth (Bediane *et al.* 2016). The recent Agenda 2063 also provides a vision of Africa through an African lens. Improvement in governance and macro-economic management primarily from a new generation of relatively skilled African leaders and policymakers is also seen as a key contributing factor to the economic recovery the continent witnessed over the past decade. The African diaspora also provides a vital source of capacity and human capital which must be harnessed for Africa's development. We need to build on these efforts in our search for solutions.

Let me hasten to add that an Africa-led development effort by no means implies the exclusion of non-African development partners. But it would require a shift in the model of development assistance from one where expatriates provide the technology, services, and answers to one where they build the capacity of African institutions and personnel to do so.

*b. Sustainable solutions must be people-centered and inclusive*

For a solution to be sustainable, it must seek to invest in people. It must seek to build the capacity of all Africans to participate and share in the gains. Investing in people to help develop their God-given talents and abilities is the most secured pathway to sustainable development. Solutions that promote extreme inequality, sideline the masses, and allow benefits to accrue to a few are doomed to fail in the long run. As recent events from the Arab spring and instability in other parts of the world have taught us, when the masses are without opportunities, they create an unstable environment and make it difficult even for the wealthy to enjoy their economic gains.

People-centered and inclusive solutions will demand investment in the education of all Africans and equip them with the subject knowledge as well as the socio-behavioral and entrepreneurial skills they need to succeed in today's world and become citizens who will act responsibly and demand accountability from their leaders. It will also require us to invest in the development of agriculture, which provides a livelihood for most of the continent's workforce. From the historical experiences of industrialized nations, agricultural growth has been a fundamental driver of economic transformation for

countries in the early stages of development. In fact, my own work and that of my colleagues at IFPRI suggest that African governments that invested heavily in their agriculture over the past decade are reaping the benefits of rapid economic growth, improved nutrition and declining poverty (Yeboah *et al.*, 2016; Badiane *et al.*, 2016). Broad-based agricultural growth offers an important pathway for creating an inclusive and sustainable economic growth with greater income and employment multiplier effects. It will also include investment to improve productivity and working conditions in the informal sector where most of Africa's labor force is employed.

*c. Build on Africa's strength and resources*

For Africa's development to be sustainable, it needs to build on the strength and the resources readily available in Africa including our natural resources, large labor force, and rich cultural heritage. Doing so requires us to take stock of what we have and find ways to use them to improve lives, build capacity and accumulate capital for further investment. I believe that development is about making an incremental improvement in one's way of life and not an abandonment of one's lifestyle for another. Development does not mean abandonment. Switching from eating fufu, ugali and gari to pizza and burgers does not make one any more developed. Neither does abandoning kente, boobu and the kangas for "suit and tie". Rather, we need to cherish what we have and find ways to use existing and new technologies to improve on them. Therefore, if you find pounding fufu or making ugali to be too strenuous a job, think about developing technologies that would make the process easier. Once you find that technology, you can then in turn market that to other cultures and make fufu and ugali a continental dish and people will pay and respect you for it. Abandoning what we have will live us forever "playing catch up" with the rest of world as it is dauntingly difficult to over-take original innovators of a technology or idea.

Building on our strength will demand that Africa takes a leading role in making solar power cheaper and widely accessible to the populace. In the same way, I have never understood why Africa has not been at the forefront of developing solar energy considering the amount of sunshine we have. We need to do better going forward and I applaud the efforts of African innovators across the continent moving in this direction. E.g. ADS Global Corporations of South Africa which has partnered with US-based Senegalese singer Akon to provide solar-powered electricity to millions of people in 25 African countries.

*d. Solutions must be environmentally friendly*

For solutions to be sustainable, they must not destroy the environment and the natural resource base upon which our development depends. For a continent that is so dependent on our environment and natural resources, we cannot afford to deplete them and be without them in the future. Unfortunately, in our current development path, the over-exploitation and depletion of our resources appear to be the norm. Between 2000 and 2010 alone, Africa lost about 34 million hectares of its forests.<sup>3</sup> This implies the loss of valuable ecosystem services from the forest including soil protection, nutrient recycling, carbon sequestration and the regulation of the quality and flow of water. (I recently

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.treehugger.com/natural-sciences/world-forest-area-still-decline.html>

learned that the Tano River, which is the main source of water in my native community has dried out for the first time in history largely due to deforestation in the river's catchment area.) Lake Chad; an important water source, which sustains agriculture for over 30 million people in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad is now one-fifth of its original size, exacerbating poverty, driving migration and fueling conflict in the region.

Oil and mineral explorations across the continent are also having untold impacts on our environment. Oil spills and gas flares are fairly commonplace in Nigeria while abandoned mine sites are polluting surface and groundwater in many African countries including Ghana and South Africa. Our sewage and waste management systems remain dysfunctional allowing our environments and water bodies to be polluted, thus increasing the threat of diseases like bilharzia, cholera, and malaria.

Africa cannot afford to continue on this path of unsustainable depletion of our resources. We will eventually deplete all the life-sustaining services in our environment and impair the ability of our children to survive and thrive on the continent in the years to come. A sustainable solution to Africa's development challenges should involve a concerted effort at all levels to balance our needs for economic development with environmental protection and I believe we can harness all available technological and social innovations to do that.

**v) Role of the African scholar**

Now, what is the role of African scholars like you and I in bringing theory to practice and ensuring that our solutions to challenges we face are sustainable? Based on the understanding that theories and solutions that are not grounded in the realities of Africa will fail and that theories need constructive feedback for revisions, African scholars- both at home and abroad- have two critical roles to play.

As African scholars in the diaspora, we have the privilege of learning about the development theories and its assumptions as well as experiencing how they work in the real world. We also have a comparatively better sociocultural understanding of Africa's conditions because we are able to analyze the situation on the continent from the outside, away from the barriers and conditions that make such analysis difficult to do at home. We are therefore well placed to critically examine how well the assumptions underlying the theory fit our local conditions and provide the needed feedback for theory refinement. In addition, we are also better placed to translate the theories we have learned into Africa's specific conditions and transmit such findings to Africa's development partners. It behooves us, therefore, to translate existing development theories into African development context and provide valuable feedback to refine the development theories to make them responsive to Africa's development challenges.

Along with that, we are also uniquely poised to develop new theories of African development that are grounded in an understanding of Africa's rich resource endowments and cultural heritage. Our duty as the African diaspora is to commit ourselves to help shape development policies, expand opportunities for skill development and technological innovation, and offer insights into capacity building, human capital development and effective resource utilization on the African continent. Even if you, as



a person cannot be personally involved in the process, at least, transmit your knowledge to others and introduce them to opportunities so that your contributions are multiplied and replicated through their enhanced capacities.

**vi) Conclusion**

Africa is at an inflection point, with great prospects to accelerate economic growth and development and to turn the fortunes of the millions of people from poverty and all the ills that hold us back. However, realizing this goal would require a deep introspection of our past to determine what works and what does not work.

We are at a stage where everyone recognizes that ideas developed in the West and franchised in Africa are not very effective. We are at a juncture where we must develop a new way of thinking about Africa's problems from an African perspective and tailoring solutions to meet Africa's unique problems using the resources and opportunities the continent readily provides. I believe as future leaders and people with the privilege of experiencing life on both continents we owe our continent a duty to provide the thought leadership to develop models that work for Africa's development context. It is about time to break-away from the notion of governance as an opportunity to amass wealth for oneself, to one that is more accountable, more transparent and more responsive to the plight of the people as well as fully-committed to the alleviation of these plights. I believe AGSA has a big role to play in educating and re-socializing that new leadership we need to transform our continent for us all.

In no time, you will be finishing your programs and will be presiding over various sectors of the economy in your countries. After 30 years into your career, will the students at that time have the same complaints you have about our current leadership or will they say that this generation of Africans provided us a clean and improved break from the past? My hope is that posterity will consider us as the generation of doers, a generation of selfless and accountable leaders, and a generation that helped to break Africa from its negative past and set it on a path towards positive change, and better, more sustainable livelihoods. We all have a role to play to make Africa what we desire it to be and the time to act is now!

Thank you for the opportunity and look forward to learning from each of you and discussing these ideas with you in the course of the day.

Thank you.

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