

Development Alternatives for a Post-Crisis World: An African perspective

DZODZI TSIKATA

ABSTRACT *Dzodzi Tsikata explains that debates about development are cyclical and coincide with various economic crises that have punctuated Africa's post-colonial history. While there is no shortage of Africa-generated responses that have also included the voices of African feminists, these have lacked traction. In a new world order where economic liberalization is losing its legitimacy as the most commonsensical approach to development, African states and civil societies have to redouble their efforts to gain policy sovereignty to secure land rights, decent work and sustainable livelihoods for all.*

KEYWORDS *women's rights; colonialism; gender; neo-liberal capitalism; basic needs; sustainable livelihoods*

Introduction

There have been debates about Africa's development since the attainment of independence from colonial rule of many African countries in the 1960s. These debates have ebbed and flowed, becoming intense at pivotal moments. The modernization approach that stressed technological development, the building of solid infrastructure and the diffusion of formal education was the dominant development discourse of the 1960s in the newly independent African countries and was accompanied by hope and excitement. It resulted in the expansion of basic education and large-scale infrastructure projects. However, very soon, the search for alternatives to modernization was on. This was in recognition of the fact that it would take more than education and infrastructure to ensure the development of Africa. Problems of economic stagnation, rural underdevelopment and poverty pointed to the failure of the modernization project. The provision of basic needs, rooted in rural development and supported by appropriate technologies became the dominant development approach in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Just before the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) from the early 1980s, Africans were once more engaged in a development debate within the context of a global economic and social development crisis triggered by a commodity prices collapse and a sharp rise in oil prices. Many Africans saw this as a crisis of both the capitalist and socialist development models manifested by growing inequalities

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between North and South, the rising power of transnational corporations, unequal terms of international trade, falling living standards and health conditions, rising food prices and growing social and political tensions as well as an arms race.

For the first time, African women entered this debate as experts, through the Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD), a continental research and advocacy organization composed of academics, development practitioners and activists. Working with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, the AAWORD organized a seminar in June 1982 in Dakar, under the theme 'Another Development with Women'. The seminar, which was attended by the leading feminist thinkers on the continent at the time together with a few of their male colleagues from Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the leading social science organization in Africa, and others from North and South issued a Dakar Declaration on Another Development with Women (Development Dialogue, 1982). The vision of another development posited in this declaration is a far cry from the SAPs imposed on African governments soon after that. While this declaration was largely forgotten at the insistence that there were no alternatives to SAPs, its recommendations are as relevant as if they were written today.

SAPs

After the introduction of SAPs in the 1980s using debt relief and IMF and World Bank financing as leverage, backed by a large and sophisticated intellectual enterprise of justification, the contestations about the most correct approach to Africa's development continued. After a few years of adjustment, the goal of development was jettisoned in favour of economic growth, which was expected to trickle down to the household level and improve the lives of all Africans.

The debates of this period focused on whether SAPs were creating economic growth, reducing poverty, ensuring the participation of people in economic decision making and demonstrating gender sensitivity in outcomes or whether concerns

about policymaking space and national sovereignty in economic decision making were also expressed in the literature (Olukoshi, 1998; Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999; Tsikata and Kerr, 2000). In debating the rights and wrongs of SAPs, the development agenda of African countries was relegated to background noise. This was in spite of proposals of an African alternative to SAPs (AAF-SAP), which was spearheaded by the UNECA, based on an earlier pivotal document, the Lagos Plan of Action. While AAFSAP received no traction from the donors and was not adopted by adjusting countries, it marked an early effort by Africans to establish their own priorities and developmental agenda.

Two decades later, in 2003, African heads of state met and adopted NEPAD as the new development agenda. NEPAD has been heavily critiqued for retaining a neo-liberal approach to Africa's development agenda, failing to involve academia and civil society groups in its deliberations and plans and neglecting to address the growing inequalities in various countries. In the critique of NEPAD, development alternatives were once again put forward by a broad range of actors including feminist scholars (Tadesse, 2002; Adesina *et al.*, 2005; Randriamaro, 2005).

Africa's development crisis

The main problems with Africa's development are well known, and often discussed in debates about alternatives. They are the failure of agrarian transformation and industrialization in Africa resulting in its positioning in the global order as the supplier of agricultural raw materials, unskilled labour and a market for a range of consumer items which it does not produce. Elements of the failed agrarian transformation include the poor linkages among various sectors of the economy and a weak food crop sector with serious challenges to food sovereignty and security (Tsikata, 2011).

After over two decades of SAPs, problems such as high rates of unemployment, labour market inequalities, widespread informalization of work and social reproduction deficits have become endemic. Linked to this is the growth in social inequalities, poverty and poor social indicators. Class, gender, regional and rural urban inequalities are

on the rise. One result is that Africa has been unable to benefit from the demographic dividend, which comes from a reduction in birth rates and dependency ratios because it lacks a well-educated and healthy labour force (Tsikata, 2009).

The social development deficits outlined above are a result of the privileging of macro-economic goals such as GDP growth and single-digit inflation over all else. For decades, social policy was not given much consideration as it was considered that GDP growth would automatically lead to improvements in social indicators. The state has been in retreat, facilitating economic liberalization while neglecting the protection of the socio-economic rights of citizens. The dominance of the economic liberalization paradigm has installed market transactions as the best approach to resource distribution. This has been accompanied by the loss of policy sovereignty, first under Structural Adjustment, and more recently under the WTO rule-based system (Tsikata and Kerr, 2000; Mbilinyi, 2001).

The lack of a robust social policy regime has been exacerbated by the limitations of gender and development policies and practices. In spite of the shifts from Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD) to gender mainstreaming, gender equity programmes continue to be dominated by income generation projects, training and skills building, credit and group formation. Gender equality provisions in land and labour legislation remain quite limited and only partially implemented (Tsikata, 2011).

The challenges

The current global, financial, energy and food crises have deepened Africa's developmental challenges. Africa has been particularly vulnerable because of the particularities of its insertion into the global economy and its pre-existing economic and social development deficits. As predicted, the crises are affecting African countries although to different degrees in terms of six pathways of impact or channels of transmission – the slowing of export growth as a result of lower export volumes and falling commodity prices, the reduction of

portfolio and foreign direct investments and more expensive foreign capital, exchange rate losses, rising interest rates, a decline in remittances and foreign aid, and a downturn in tourism. There are particular social groups in Africa most badly affected by the crisis. These include households living in poverty in rural and urban areas and in inhospitable agro-climatic zones, food crop farmers particularly those operating on a small scale or assisting with family farm enterprises, workers in the informal economies, particularly those operating in its survivalist segments, unemployed persons, particularly young school dropouts. These individuals constitute the majority of the population in Africa (Tsikata, 2010).

For many women in Africa, gender inequalities in the division of productive and reproductive labour, the gender segmentation of the labour markets, inequalities in access to and control of productive resources – particularly land, capital and labour – have made them particularly vulnerable. Women food farmers and urban women in the small-scale trading and service sectors of the informal economy constitute a large segment of the poor, and they are not likely to have financial reserves and other resources to survive the global downturn. They and their households, particularly in situations where they are the sole breadwinners, are vulnerable to deeper impoverishment. Past experience has shown that while women often experience impacts more deeply, but also in very particular ways, their situation is worsened by unfavourable policy choices to mitigate the impacts of the crises.

Never have the livelihoods of so many been so precarious. The scale of the problem of livelihood insecurities is a threat to democracy and development. The problem of youth and graduate unemployment deserves special mention as it has implications for the future workforce. While the lack of employment statistics in most countries, with the exception of South Africa, and the proliferation of precarious informal work has protected governments from having to answer for the employment policy failures under SAPs, the impacts of the situation can be seen in election and other forms of political violence, agitations for economic and political reform and regular

strikes in Kenya, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Swaziland, Malawi, South Africa and Ghana, to name only a few.

Women's rights activism for alternative development

As we have indicated, women's rights activists and intellectuals have been calling for alternative development, which is gender equitable for decades. The Dakar Resolution of 1982 contains in outline a programme for alternative development, which remains highly relevant today. Since Dakar, African perspectives have influenced thinking on a gender equitable alternative development agenda. At the level of the World Conferences on Women, African women's perspectives influenced the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies and the Beijing Platform for Action, whether it was in insisting on attention to poverty, underdevelopment and environmental degradation or in championing the cause of rural women and girls. African feminist perspectives have also been influential in the global women's movements positions on a wide range of issues, the latest being aid effectiveness and financing for development where African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) hosted a conference on women, which produced a resolution that influenced the deliberations of the third High-Level Forum in Accra (Accra Women's Forum Declaration, 2008).

However, the fragmentation of development issues as a result of their ordering by United Nations processes has hampered the design of holistic agendas for alternative development. For example, women's rights activists, researchers and policymakers often specialize in two or three of the twelve critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action or one of the eight millennium-development goals. This situation has been worsened by the limitations of organizational forms and demands of some of the gender equality activism. In the case of land, for example, the demands have largely been about registration of land titles in the names of both spouses, participation in land adjudication bodies and the reform or

circumscription of customary law. In the case of work and employment, the demands remain credit and improved technologies for self-employed workers. Not much attention is being paid to the wider neo-liberal paradigm and its deficit. In terms of organizational form, most organizations are NGOs and lack the membership and mobilizational strength, while devoting much of their attention to policy advocacy.

In spite of these limitations, various statements of African women's organizations since Nairobi are an implied or explicit critique of the dominant development paradigm. African feminists, in collaboration with the regional and global women's movements, ensured that both the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies and the Beijing platform for action took seriously the questions of poverty, livelihood insecurities and gender-biased economic policies (Tsikata, 2011).

African feminist responses

Beyond official processes, the written outputs organizations such as the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme, the NETRIGHT, Women for Change, Zambia, African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) raise the need for the broadest possible transformation of society and politics to promote sustainable livelihoods for all. Through their wide-ranging critique of adjustment, African feminists contributed to popular struggles around the SAPs. For example, the Gender and Economic Reforms in Africa Programme, a research and advocacy network, created a platform for multinational research and regional advocacy on a wide range of economic policy issues. This work has continued with the critique of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and demands for reform as well as their work in the area of gender budgeting in Tanzania, South Africa and several other countries. As well, in particular moments such as land tenure reforms, African feminists have not been found wanting. Women in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Sierra Leone, to name only a few, have been at the forefront of advocacy to promote gender equity in the land tenure reforms of

their countries. Most importantly, African women have been at the forefront of recent food riots and community actions over land deals in several African countries. In their day-to-day lives, women have been on the frontline of the struggle survival at the level of their households and communities.

What has been gained in these struggles is significant, in the sense that economic liberalization has lost its legitimacy as the most commonsensical approach to the serious economic challenges of African economies. As well, popular struggles have put poverty, poor development indicators and the lack of participation in policymaking and undemocratic gender discriminatory decision making at the centre of a critique of economic policies. In spite of this, and even in the face of the global financial crisis, economic policy remains steeped in economic liberalization and the belief in the markets to regulate economic transactions in the most efficient and optimum manner. Economic policies remain gender blind, continue to privilege the private sector as the engine of growth and neglect the conditions of labour.

Towards the establishment and implementation of development alternatives

The magnitude of the current global crisis has provided the opportunity to move the search for alternative development approaches from statements to sustained practice, particularly as the broad outlines of various alternatives have been in place in Africa for decades. In the Dakar Declaration on Alternative Development, for example, an agenda for gender equitable sustainable development was laid out. Its main elements are agrarian transformation and economic diversification with a clear industrialization strategy. This involves agricultural intensification and commercialization involving high value production with linkages to industry, but also giving equal attention to food production and distribution for own consumption and to increase household incomes. This strategy has a place for trade, but trade not to open up economies but to support the development

aspirations of African countries and to promote regional integration (Development Dialogue, 1982).

A key aspect of this strategy is the creation of decent employment as well as support for social reproduction. Social development, poverty reduction, the realization of the demographic dividend and the reduction of social inequalities of gender, class and location are key goals of the strategy. The return of a reformed developmental state, which drives development, is an important underpinning of the strategy. Such a state is not only proactive in the promotion of developmental goals, but also promotes democracy, popular participation, social development and equity. To fulfil these objectives, the post-colonial patriarchal African state needs fundamental reforms (Adedze, 2011; Edigheji, 2011).

Beyond the detailing of these broad outlines into a programmatic strategy, alternative development approaches need traction, which they have lacked, not because they are unworkable, impractical or not detailed enough, but because of the weak position of African countries in relation to other powers in the global order and the inability of African civil society mobilization to force a fundamental change in direction. Increasingly, popular struggles are being led by NGOs, and mass mobilization has been replaced by policy advocacy fragmented in single issues. The changing and complicated terrain of struggle demands organizational forms that can both mobilize and are effective policy advocates. It also demands the recognition that the struggle for alternative development strategies and their implementation requires broad interconnected agendas for change. Without these fundamental shifts, there can be no alternative development.

The importance of certain kinds of mass mobilization, the reform of NGO activism and the need for greater room for gender perspectives are key. Feminists need to be more proactive in linking their concerns with those of other popular forces in ways that strengthen popular struggles.

Conclusion

Above all, Africa needs to reclaim its policy sovereignty. The efforts by European powers and

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the United States to address their respective debt crises and the turmoil on the streets represented by the Occupation movements contain lessons about the role of states in driving solutions, the need for governments to work together in the supreme interest of Africa and the importance of paying attention to the conditions of the most adversely affected constituencies in this crisis.

Feminist leadership is more necessary than ever before. This is because in spite of its limita-

tions and the difficulties of the terrain, feminist analyses of the global economic and social crisis and its solutions remain the most encompassing and forward looking. The feminist vision of development remains the most inclusive and most humane. Feminists must claim space at the centre of the struggle for alternative development and work with mainstream actors in academia, policy and civil society to ensure that the alternative development that becomes dominant will be gender equitable and sustainable.

Note

- 1 An early edited version of this article was first published by AWID programme IDEa. This version is based on the original text submitted by Dzodzi Tsikata.

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