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A review of „The little book of African development perspectives“

Une critique de „Le petit livre des perspectives africaines de développement“

The book is a product of a research work conducted within the Africa Cluster of Excellence at the University of Lagos, and funded by the German Research Foundation, DFG). It is a serious attempt to probe into the often-confusing concept of development. In an attempt to do justice to this, the researchers interviewed a cross-section of scholars and intellectuals and cited the works of other outstanding and influential scholars.

Some fundamental questions were raised in the forward which helped to situate the concept:

1. ...Is development measurable? If so, are the measuring indices that are often employed objective or subjective?
2. Is development a product of popular (but not necessarily well informed) clamour, or transformative (but imposed) idea(s) of a hegemonic elite?
3. Is development an urban phenomenon, driven by urban dynamics and urban-based elites and interests? What is the agency that owns the project and for whom is it being undertaken?
4. Is -developmentll ever a democratic project?
5. What role does technology play in development?
6. Can development be achieved without exploitation and social injustice? Is it linear or reversible?
7. Does development have an antipode in anti-development?
8. Can a locale develop in one sphere (such as technology) but remain underdeveloped in another (such as governance)? In other words, is balanced development (sectoral, sub-national) attainable?

9. Is development still (or no longer) a Western construct, a representation of Western values and imperial hegemony?l.

These questions give direction to the central issues which most of the interviewees responded to. Apparently, they have been captured in the various answers compiled by the authors under contextualizing African development needs, decolonizing African development trajectory, the urgency for cultural renaissance in African development, inclusivity in African development, extensive governance reforms, and perhaps drawing from the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, and the African union –Agenda 2063-The Africa we wantll, followed by cross-sectional opinions on African development, punctuated intermittently with pictorial symbols of development.

From the various perspectives on development, it does seem that there is a common agreement on what development entails, albeit from the African perspective, thus:

That development is characterized as,

- Adequate social infrastructures such as constant electricity, good network of roads, potable water, well equipped and functional schools and hospitals and sound communication networks
- Adequate Security to protect lives and property
- Good governance and political stability
- Industrialization
- High savings and investments
- Strong economy that creates jobs and wealth
- Self-sufficiency in food production
- Adequate human capital and technological know-how
- High standard of living for the majority of the people
- Low level of unemployment
- Low level of poverty
- Low level of crimes

Moreover, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), societal development can be measured using the Human Development Index (HDI) and this includes:

- High life expectancy
- High literacy level
- High income level

Consequently, for any society to be regarded as developed, it must be able to provide those basic amenities that would prolong the life of its inhabitants, provide education for the majority of its citizens as well as good jobs that can fetch them enough income to live quality lives.

However, while the foregoing cannot be ignored in any development discourse, the methodology for achieving these goals is, to me, what remains largely contentious between both scholars and practitioners and scholars alike. In this respect, many schools of thought abound, such as, the Modernization school, the Dependence school, and the developmental state theorists. What has happened, however, is that most of the countries that are regarded as developed did not pass through only one particular method or path of development. Most of the advanced or developed countries of the world unite to oppress the developing countries, but have ground rules among themselves on how to do business. They are in control of the structures and institutions of development and also determine the pace of events in world economy.

The book has a major strong point of bringing to the fore what development means to many Africans. Unfortunately, most of the African thinkers and scholars view development from the prism of the West. I have had occasions to take a swipe at some of our colleagues who teach African philosophy, but perhaps cannot adequately describe what an African shrine/temple looks like nor can they practice divination in accordance with the African tradition or indigenous knowledge. What this means, in essence, is that African development is not driven by African culture. In

this respect, Oluwole (2017) and Eesuola (2018, 2022) amongst others, have contended that Ifa is the philosophical source of Yoruba/African existence, and that the issue of development is located in any of the 256 Odu.

Perhaps this is why we have to acknowledge the fact that development today is largely technology driven. Africans do not own the technology nor the propaganda machinery to propel the kind of perception that would sell African perception of development to the world, in order for the rest of the world to start thinking seriously about doing business with Africa. This is why it seems to me that it is perhaps misleading, as claimed in the –forward‘ to the book, that, –...development...is not driven or sustained by external forces, (p. 1, paragraph 1, line5). I think so because, the manner Africa was subjugated into the world order puts the continent in a skewed and asymmetrical relationship with the leading world powers, who essentially drive and sustain what they think development is and should be.

In terms of the structure and arrangement of the book, I think the first section, –In search of [the] what African Development really means, should take the last section, after analyzing the opinions of the respondents/interviewees/scholars/ intellectuals on the subject matter.

The book seems to create the impression that only African opinions on African development is relevant. Except the opinion of Howard French, the American Journalist, photographer and Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, –To understand something so antithetical to conventional wisdom as the idea that Africa is the key to our global future, it is helpful to understand something equally remote from standard Western narratives about the world, how extraordinarily central Africa was to the very creation of ourfamiliar world, which seems evasive to the core thesis of the book, there is no other Western perspective on African

development accommodated in the book. It would be trite as a scholarly enterprise to create balance, while making a case for African development. Again, the book is mainly about African opinions on African development and not how Africans want to actualize the kind of development they envisage.

A few errata were observed;

Page 3: the title page should read, –in search of what African Development really means, and not –In search of the what African Development really means.

Page 37, line 5, should read, –...., a semi-urban community in Nigeria, and not –a peri-urban community in Nigeria.

Finally, the book is a good piece of work that reflects on African development.

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