

BUILDING CONSENSUS FOR REFORM

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In the last few years, it has been hard for us in Africa to focus on reform. Too often, it's as much as we could handle to keep our heads above water - whether economically or politically. Everyone seems to be scrambling in the present, with hardly any energy available to look ahead, to create visions, to form strategies.

If policy thinkers have surfaced, they have just as likely been devoting their attention to helping Coca Cola or Citibank as to worrying about whole countries. Low salaries in government and universities have not always attracted the best brains. And so, by default, reform initiatives have tended to come from the World Bank and other external sources. Today, it is at the very heart of their business to be 'policy wonks'. Little wonder therefore that we have a hard time absorbing and owning 'World Bank' prescriptions - never mind their often highly inconvenient nature! The challenge is made bigger by the fact that our governance has been of the 'command and control' style, where the need for selling and buying-in has been limited. Even the emerging multi-party systems have not done much to change the situation, as political activity has not yet migrated to competing for ideas. Rather, fueled in many countries by a lively media, in most countries it has merely led to noisy squabbling between ethnically-backed personalities.

Forming visions? Sharing them? Implementing them? No time for that. So far, there has been little need for it. At least not merely to survive in power. So far, ruling political parties have been able to get away without comprehensive manifestos that they were serious about implementing. Oppositions too have not managed to challenge for power by offering constructive, credible policy alternatives. Of course there have been exceptions.

When President Obasanjo took over the reins of power in Nigeria, it is not only Nigerians who felt he meant what he said about reforming that under performing dynamo. When Thabo Mbeki succeeded Mandela, we took him at his word as he laid out his vision for building on his predecessor's great legacy. But for too many African leaders, it's still more a question of 'jobs for the boys' and 'get rich quick'. Even when a reform policy is agreed upon with 'our development partners', it's hard to avoid the feeling that it has been foisted upon us by 'foreign masters' (the populists' alternative label), who may even have 'hidden neo-colonialist agendas'.

Let us assume though that the need for some reform or other is accepted, and that funding support is to be made available. The next question is whether those funds will indeed be used for the purpose intended. The lack of trust in African leaders makes it yet more difficult for them to sell reform. Look at the track record, people say. What happened to the *last* intended reforms?

The result is skepticism, apathy, at best wait-and-see. The credibility of government spokespersons is hampered by the poor track record, and their efforts at raising enthusiasm for initiatives that involve yet more belt-tightening understandably themselves lack enthusiasm.

Credibility has been further hampered by those 'boys' who got jobs way above their capabilities. Boys who can neither formulate nor communicate policies. And I say 'boys' advisedly, in that they are rarely 'girls'! I will also add that our own All Africa Businesswomen's Association is about to draw up a structured data-base of competent qualified women upon whom governments can draw when they are filling national positions.

Fortunately, in many African countries (including Kenya), civil society has increasingly been making its voice heard. It has become bolder and more pro-active in interacting with government - and, it has to be said, more often than not these days with the express encouragement *of* government.

Now private citizens, certainly in Kenya, have so lost faith in the ability of governments to 'sort things out' that they are devoting much more of their personal time to complementing public sector efforts. I will again say that by and large such efforts have been welcomed by political leaders, who are the first to accept the limitations of government.

Let me take some examples from Kenya.

Our Institute of Economic Affairs has been involved in a number of high impact initiatives aimed at activating public opinion and public energy. The first I wish to mention is a study entitled *Our problems, our Solutions*. Researchers of the institute looked at each sector of the economy, defined the challenges, and proposed strategies for development.

A book was published, with smaller summarised versions also produced. Lively seminars, complete with satirical sketches, and well covered by the media, drew attention not only to our plight but to the fact that we *owned* both the problems *and* the solutions. Senior people, from both the public and private sectors came, felt guilty, felt motivated, and left with a new feeling of hope.

The same institute applied the well-known technique of *Scenario Planning* to evaluating *Kenya at the Crossroads*. Seminars and pamphlets confronted Kenyans with four future alternative scenarios that were laid out as fables, from the most pessimistic (*el Nino*) to the most optimistic (*Flying Geese*). All scenarios were possible. All made a profound impact to anyone who was exposed to them. It was a wake-up call to us all, a realisation that without dramatic reform we are headed for the *el Nino* scenario.

Next I want to mention the newly-formed Kenya Private Sector Foundation, which is being set up as a vehicle to bring together all the professional associations in Kenya. As has already happened in Uganda and elsewhere, manufacturers, lawyers, managers, farmers, educators, small business, employers and others are represented in the foundation.

Their agenda is broad, in their desire to provide a whole new source of energy in the formulation and implementation of national policies. They expect to help provide people from across the private sector to respond to government requests for involvement on various boards, task forces and other committees. In this way, bolder approaches to reform can be adopted, with more stakeholders contributing and hence owning the outcomes.

There are many examples of individuals and groups in Kenya who have made a difference: look at Eric Krystall, who found inspiration in South Africa for transmitting urgent social messages using puppets. *Puppets against AIDS* have been followed by *Puppets against Corruption*, and other causes have been aired, with high impact and with high socially acceptability.

And look at our religious leaders, who have plunged wholeheartedly into issues of governance that have made them very unpopular with politicians. In some African countries women's organisations have contributed effectively to building consensus for reform. But I would say that we are still an emerging force, a force whose potential has by no means been fully developed. I believe that will change dramatically in the coming years, and I expect that AABA will play its role in stimulating that development.

Not that I like bundling women with youth, but I think the same charge of 'unfulfilled potential' can also be leveled at our younger people. We know why the voices of both women and young people have not been heard too much. We know all about our chauvinistic, elder-dominated societies. But we also know the price we have paid for allowing so much talent and energy to go under-utilised. So much momentum can be built around healthy long-term reform by strengthening those women's and youth organisations that do exist.

Finally, I must refer to the increasingly vital role played by the media, without whom it is virtually impossible for reform to take root. I marvel, as I drive to the office listening to my car radio, at the vibrant exchange of views that daily takes place on burning national issues. The advent of FM channels, coupled with a newfound freedom of speech, has opened up our minds, made us all policy analysts. And this exists side by side with the equally valuable BBC, CNN and others, that provide intensive, objective, continent-wide coverage.

I would like to conclude by saying something that may seem paradoxical: we have to look back into our past in order to look forward to a better future.

I am proud of the fact that I was brought up according to a rich traditional African culture that values family, respect for elders, hard work, honesty and other universal prerequisites of thriving ongoing societies. Not only in Kenya, not only in Africa, too many people have lost touch with these fundamentals. But I put it to you that unless we find ways of rediscovering our traditional values, we shall not be standing on ground that can absorb the short term sacrifices that are required for long term nation-building.

If we *can* look back into our communal roots, and apply their fine values to our citizenship of the global village, then we shall certainly be able to handle the much needed reforms.