



HARNESSING ASSOCIATIONAL NETWORKING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR DEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Within the past three decades, widespread poverty has accompanied Western influenced neo-liberal policies often camouflaged as vital development initiatives (e.g. SAP and privatization programme). Still, within the same period, the continent has witnessed spontaneous emergence of numerous associational groups; created through social networking for the utilization of social capital for the satisfaction of individual and group development needs as strategy against poverty. These associations are usually in form of cooperative, welfare, town and/or friendship groups. It is important to note that a basic feature of the associations, especially, in terms of social networking for social survival is related to the communal value of African societies as against the modernist/Western preference for individuality. The aim of the article is to examine the relevance of associational groups to the development of West Africa with the primary objective of presenting a possible policy position on harnessing associational networking and social capital for development in West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

A major focus of international policy as from the mid-20th century has been the quest for development across all sectors (Escobar 2011). Development was thus first and foremost viewed from the perspective of economic growth through dependence on laissez faire principles (Olutayo, Olutayo and Omobowale 2008, Olutayo and Omobowale 2007). But for ideological opposition from socialist nations led by defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), dependency circles in Latin America and a few African nations; capitalist oriented economic policy favoured by Western countries took pre-eminence (Buzan 2008, Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000, O'Connor, 1989). Usually reduced to pawns, African nations in general and West African countries

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in particular could do little to channel an independent course to development. They were therefore entangled either in capitalist ideology of the West or the Socialist perspective of the East.

As the Soviet Union gradually crumbled as from the 1980s, capitalist orientation became principally dominant, and so in line with the dictate of Bretton Woods organisations, African nations had to adopt modernist initiatives caricatured as economic and development reforms as well as liberal democracy at the pain of sanctions (Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010, Olutayo and Omobowale 2006, Sharp and Briggs 2006, Olutayo and Omobowale 2005, Briggs and Yeboah 2001, Logan and Mengisteab 1993). A good example of such was the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and its surviving variants including privatization and free trade that have exposed West African industries and economy to unhealthy competition and accompanying economic downturn and pauperization (Omobowale 2011, Olutayo, Omobowale and Amzat 2009).

Building on existing social value of association for common good, Africans have been able to consciously and unconsciously form associational groups depending on social networks of interactional values to satisfy individual and group needs, irrespective of their peasant nature (Omobowale 2011, Abutudu 2002, Asaju 2002, Moyo 2002). Such groups include friendship groups, cooperative associations and welfare groups among others. Central to these groups is the value for networking as social capital for social survival. The associations afford members bonding values, which de-emphasise individualist orientation of the modernist perspective and rather emphasises a union of members for individual and group development (Omobowale and Olutayo 2009). As much as the successes of these groups have rather been quite and more evident in micro situations, this paper posits that the success could be extended to the macro, provided its values are well harnessed using the bottom-up approach.

Against the bottom-up approach, the top-bottom approach has over the years been the preferred option in development policy and its implementation. It entails policy makers designing and implementing policies only based on their own thoughts and opinions about development with little or no input from the masses, to whom such policies are designed (Nikkhah and Redzuan 2009). In fact, as earlier mentioned, such policies are rather more often than not foreign creations targeted at enhancing international commerce within national boundaries, with the opening up of trade for multinational corporations. Of course, in monetary figures, the economy seems to grow, but in terms of human development, the population suffers. This obviously explains the preference for human development and not just economic growth, in development circles in recent times. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate the impact of the imposed structural adjustment on West Africans especially as regards the pauperisation of the mass majority. This we now turn to.

Structural Adjustment Programme and Pauperization

Hardly could the economic and development history of the late 20th Century Africa be written without a major section devoted to the introduction and implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and its consequent impact on the population. Along with other

countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Third World in general, West African nations were forced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to adopt the SAP in the 1980s. It was a policy supposedly directed at plugging leakages in fiscal policy in order to finance vital projects and pay back loans owed Western international lending institutions (Abor and Quartey 2010, Olutayo and Omobowale 2006, Olutayo and Omobowale 2005, Dollar and Svensson 2000).

The SAP thus entailed rolling back of government from the provision of social services including education and health, devaluation of currency, specialisation in primary products, free trade, embargo on employment and salary increment and privatization of public enterprises. Economically debilitating consequences immediately followed the implementation of SAP across Africa. Industries collapsed, agricultural production fell, unemployment rose astronomically and the bulk of the population was left pauperised even as SAP encouraged capital flight (reportedly amounting to about \$100 billion yearly (Tulu 2007)) through debt servicing, importation and the activities of multinational corporations (MNCs) that repatriated funds to home countries due to the free trade policy (Louis 2005, Oduro and Aryee 2003, Briggs and Yeboah 2001, Geo-Jaja and Mangum 2001, Adepoku 1993, Logan and Mengisteab 1993, Ridell, 1992).

Continual outflow of funds of course means little to invest for wealth creation and poverty alleviation. Thus, by 2005, more than 50 per cent and 70 per cent of sub-Saharan Africans lived on less than \$1.25 and \$ 2 dollar per day respectively; an indication of absolute poverty. Furthermore, the mean consumption of the poor in Africa (70 cents per day) was also the lowest in the World (World Bank 2010, Aigbokhan 2008, Oduro and Aryee 2003). This had direct bearing on access to survival needs including, food, shelter, education, communication, health, income, water, energy and other components of descent livelihood, which are the indices considered in the measurement of the human development index. Hence, table 1 below show the Human Development Index for West African countries.

Table 1: Human Development Index (HDI) for West African Countries as at 2014

Country	Human Develop Index (HDI)	Status	Position
Cape Verde	0.646	Medium Human Development	122
Ghana	0.579	Medium Human Development	140
Nigeria	0.514	Low Human Development	152
Togo	0.484	Low Human Development	161
Benin	0.480	Low Human Development	166
Senegal	0.466	Low Human Development	170
Cote d'Ivoire	0.462	Low Human Development	172



Gambia	0.441	Low Human Development	175
Liberia	0.430	Low Human Development	177
Guinea-Bissau	0.420	Low Human Development	178
Mali	0.419	Low Human Development	179
Sierra Leone	0.413	Low Human Development	181
Guinea	0.411	Low Human Development	182
Burkina Faso	0.402	Low Human Development	183
Niger	0.348	Low Human Development	188

Source: United Nations Development Programme (2014)

Table 1 above shows that only Cape Verde and Ghana are within the Medium Human Development margin with HDI values 0.646 and 0.579 respectively, All others including Nigeria, Togo, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Gambia, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra-Leone and Niger have poor HDI values. Still out of the 188 countries whose HDIs are available, Cape Verde, the country with the best HDI in West Africa ranked 122nd, Ghana, 140 and Nigeria, 152. , The country with the global worst HDI ranking was Niger at 188th position. That most of West African countries have low HDI values shows that they perform poorly in terms of human development. Putting sub-Saharan Africa's predicament more concisely, Adejumbi (2006:7; 8) states:

The severity of poverty in Africa is attested to by the fact that about 22 out of the 25 poorest countries in the World are in Africa and 320 million people out of a total population of 1.2 billion living on less than \$1 per day reside in Africa...Unlike most regions of the World, as noted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), poverty in Africa has been on the rise, despite an upward trend in real growth rate over the last five years... While on the global average, the incidence of poverty decreased from 40% in 1980 to 20% in 2003, paradoxically in sub-Saharan Africa, it rose from 44.6% to 46.4%...(p. 7)

The scenario of poverty in Africa is not restricted to consumption and income variables; non-income poverty is also daunting. Social indicators in Africa like infant mortality, life expectancy and school enrolments are some of the lowest in the World. In Sub-Saharan Africa 157 children out of 1000 die before the age of 5, and 90 out of 1000 die before the age of one. Gross primary school enrolment rate is 74%, one of the lowest in the World, and life expectancy stands at 52 years. Among the six countries with the highest maternal mortality rates between 1990 and 1993, four of them are African countries (Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Somalia). Over



250 million people lack access to safe drinking water and over 200 million people have no access to basic health care services... On average, 45-50% of sub-Saharan Africans live below the poverty line—a much higher proportion than in any region of the World... (p. 8)

Nevertheless, in spite of these grim statistics, it is important to note that a huge mass of Africans and in particular West Africans have survived through these years of SAP and ensuing pauperisation through indigenous networking and social capital (Omobowale 2011). This we now turn to.

Associational Networking, Social Capital and Human Development

Against the rationalists' individualistic approach, the social capital perspective emphasises the use of bonds of love, trust, friendship and kinship as productive resources for social survival. Vital to social capital is the embedded processes of social networking that connects people to one another for the satisfaction of needed resources on the basis of mutual bonds. According to Coleman (1988:598):

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that its absence would not be possible.

Buttressing Coleman, it is imperative to emphasise the pivotal role of the social structure in the functioning of social relations for social capital. Social relations are embedded within social norms, values and expectations as prescribed or sanctioned by the social structure. As people operate within the ambit of social norms, values and expectations, bonds of loyalty and trust are created to cement social fusion. Thus, members share mutual concerns and are morally expected to see to the satisfaction of mutual needs. The combination of these values and processes provide succour to members on the basis of social capital directed at productive values and human development (see Farr 2004, Frietag 2003, Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003, Liu and Besser 2003, Temple 1998).

Africa's experience with chronic socio-economic downturn leading to mass pauperisation of the citizenry within the last three decades has also strengthened social capital predicated on the bonds of love, trust, friendship and kinship (Abutudu 2002, Asaju 2002, Moyo 2002). Social networking provides access to productive resources and in-builds bonded individuals with productive power. This is in consonance with Ribot and Peluso's (2003:173) position that:



Regardless of how we categorize them, the various mechanisms of resource access form the constitutive strands of bundles of power from which resource benefits are gained over a life time of resource production, transformation and end use. Some actors in these webs of social relations control and maintain access by controlling single strands or bundles of powers. Some actors pool their powers, forming bundles of owners, workers, or beneficiaries acting in concert to assert greater control or to maintain resource access.

Thus for example in Nigeria, Ezeani and Ayichi (2002) have shown that even for political actors, identification with associational groups at the grassroots enhance political success. This is because, the embedded social network present political actors as preferred candidate to be voted. Likewise Omobowale and Olutayo (2010) in a study carried out in Ibadan, Nigeria, found out that aside using associational networking to satisfy survival needs, the consequent associational embeddedness also affords a group; common-front power with which they attract the attention of political stake-holders for the attraction of goods. Unfortunately, however, the relationship terminates at the point of patronage that becomes exploitative at the end of the day. Whereas, the example above shows that associational embeddedness may attract the attention of the political elite for infrastructural development, the patronage dimension it takes; casts a slur on it, as it rather makes it political capital at the detriment of clients (Meagher 2005).

A success story however is that of Lalupon. Lalupon is a community in Ibadan that believes it is being denied developmental goods due to its insistence on a social identity independent of Ibadan. Though Lalupon is largely a community of peasants, through the workings of its social groups, Lalupon has been able to build a Police station, secondary school, town hall and post office among other infrastructure. Notably, such infrastructure take the notion of the “we value”. A value that in-builds social identity and responsibility for sustenance into infrastructure (Omobowale and Olutayo 2010, 2009). And so, unlike state provided infrastructures whose sustenance are seen as the responsibility of the state, as they gradually go moribund, those that are provided by the community through associational networking and social capital are seen as group legacy for social survival that must not collapse, but be sustained for social good (Omobowale and Olutayo 2009). Still, in Nigeria, there are numerous formal and informal cooperative and welfare societies providing access to loans, housing, education, foodstuffs and entrepreneurial opportunities to members based on embedded social networking and ensuing social capital.

Scholarly empirical evidence across West Africa show that social capital increases agricultural traders productivity in Benin (Fafchamps and Minten 2001), enhances economic growth and good governance in small Island nations including Cape Verde (Baldacchino 2005), enhanced war-time social survival and encouraged post-conflict peace-building and development in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Sawyer 2005, Richards, Bah and Vincent 2004) and boosts agricultural extension and rural development in villages in Mali (Reid and Salmen 2000). Social capital has also boosted household welfare in Burkina-Faso (Grootaert, Gi-Taik and Swamy 2002)



and enhanced biodiversity conservation and management in Burkina-Faso and Niger among other countries across the world (Pretty and Smith 2004).

Having addressed the efficacy of associational networking in social capital and human development, it is important to discuss how the potentials of associations can be harnessed through bottom-up approach for development purposes.

Bottom-Up Development: The Associational Dimension

Indeed Africa is regarded as the most backward continent. What makes Africa backward, however, is neither lack of human resources nor dearth of productive potentials. Africa's backwardness can be traced to ill-policies forced on African countries by Bretton Wood agencies (including World Bank and IMF) and developed countries at the pain of sanctions, corruption and half-hearted commitment to development by political leaders. As it has been shown above, sub-Saharan Africans have survived through associational networking and social capital in spite of the debilitating economic slow-down.

Any development initiative that would be effective therefore should directly involve the grassroots using the bottom-up approach. Emphasis should be on the involvement of the grassroots in development policy design and implementation in order to garner workable indigenous knowledge and local support. Of course, unlike many present designs that limit local involvement to consultation with traditional office holders and local elites occupying executive positions in community development committees, efforts should be made to integrate associational groups in development process. This would indeed involve the real grassroots people. A cue could be made from the Lalupon experience. Whenever any development need is identified, Lalupon approaches its associational groups. A comity of all the groups agrees on how much each member would contribute toward the provision of the infrastructure. Thus, so far, Lalupon has been able to provide what the government has failed to provide. Indeed, Lalupon would have a better success story if the government would support it and also involve its associations in development process however little. The involvement would give the grassroots a consciousness of belonging and thus determination for sustenance as in the case of infrastructural development at Lalupon in Nigeria (Omobowale and Olutayo 2009). Other such success stories are Agricultural extension and rural development in Mali (Reid and Salmen 2000) and biodiversity conservation and management in Niger (Pretty and Smith 2004) among others.

The way forward therefore is to recognise and appreciate associational worth in local/grassroots development. Grassroots development should therefore involve active participation of local groups. Of course, their material contribution may be a little fraction of the cost of development project cost; their non-material contribution would be in full through active participation in conceptualisation, design and implementation. Indeed, the bonding values that hold associations together for social survival will be transferred to development efforts that involve them. Any member that does not participate would be socially considered an outcast. The social stigma that comes with such would readily secure the support of members who may otherwise



abstain. Thus, the development effort takes up the “we value” consciousness that must be sustained by all, for all. Beyond that, it may also become a reference point in group identity and solidarity. And so, by and large, social bonding and unity of all, predicated on associational networking generates social capital directed at successful design, implementation and sustenance of projects, even when such projects are initiated by the government.

Conclusion

In spite of development quest across West African countries, most of them have remained rather under-development with the majority of the population living below the poverty line. A common feature of the bulk of the policies so far is that they are imported and largely support laissez faire principles, which emphasise profit and economic growth, but most of the time, at the expense of human development as the case of the SAP.

Since social capital has been adjudged productive resource that has sustained the impoverished, especially at the grassroots; through associational networking, it is important to harness it in development policy making. It would build on social bond predicated on the goal of social survival. And thus, the citizenry will work together with policy makers for the conceptualisation, design, implementation and sustenance of projects directed at social development. Hence, the citizenry would build the consciousness that views social/group survival through active participation in development infrastructure and its (their) sustenance as a social task that must be done right from the grassroots to the populations up the social ladder.



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