

Community empowerment and progress in Africa - notes from the field

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Abstract

This paper presents information on how progress and development in Africa have been discussed at the national, regional and international levels in recent years.

It aims as well at presenting examples of good practices in terms of localized community experiences. The cases chosen highlight the importance of cultural and political heritage, transmission of knowledge, and generational interactions.

We focus on the case of Guiné-Bissau, and on the role of culture and community building as means to encourage the discussion and implementation of new solutions for old and recent problems.

Keywords: Africa, development, Guiné-Bissau, culture.

1. Progress in Africa

When discussing how African countries deal with the regulation of progress, it is very common to simplify this issue by looking at the international indexes on human development and crisis management. This view often hides endogenous readings on reality, mainly in two ways: how localized practices of progress and control of responses to conflict operate; how recent events, mainly since the late 80s, determine the relation between international commitments and national realities.

Some case studies as presented by other researchers and by myself prove that African realities, when considered through a perspective based on community practices, have found through time responses to principles of governance and to national challenges.

Recent cycles and levels of higher education training in and outside the continent show that capacity building is a reality and that development occurs often against all odds even in countries struggling with democratic institutionalization.

In a discussion paper presented to the DPADM (Division for Public Administration and Development Management United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) in November 2005, Alphonse Mekolo and Valentina Resta, its authors, remind us that

issues of governance are not new in Africa and that the application of governance principles was often disturbed by wars as well as socio-political or economic crises affecting some countries on the continent. (...) this paper underlines efforts made by African countries in implementing principles of good governance while at the same time facing the challenges of development which they experience with acuity since the 1990s.

(unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan021509.pdf, p. 2)

As the UN's Millennium Development Goals (<http://www.unfoundation.org/what-we-do/issues/mdgs.html>) launched a path towards the pursuit of common grounds on core issues such as the eradication of extreme poverty and the pursuit of literacy in its many fronts, Africa responded to this challenge through the involvement of institutions such as the African Union (AU) in programs addressed specifically to comply with these criteria.

Today, the AU is working towards the 2063 agenda combining past, present and future actions. One might say that the basic challenges have yet to be met in many countries and regions. Still, this shows how the internal discussion is being held in the continent and how the AU members are working together. The general plan for this agenda reads as follows:

It is a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of the continent over the next 50 years. It builds on, and seeks to accelerate the implementation of past and existing continental initiatives for growth and sustainable development.

Some of the past and current initiatives it builds on include: the Lagos Plan of Action, The Abuja Treaty, The Minimum Integration Programme, the Programme for Infrastructural Development in Africa (PIDA), the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), The New partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), Regional Plans and Programmes and National Plans. It is also built on national, regional, continental best practices in its formulation.

(<https://au.int/agenda2063>)

Though its Flagship Projects seem to be more focused on trade and economic development, the project of free circulation in the continent and the E-networks to be created, as well the expected "Silencing of the guns" may bring hope to cultural and educational development with impact on regional and local dynamics.

Africa is moving and it is doing so at a very fast pace. In July 2017 the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (MIF), an institution that has been working towards Good Governance in Africa, is set to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the African Peer Review Mechanism

(APRRM) on the margins of the Twenty-Ninth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 4 July 2017. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation becomes this way the third Strategic Partner to sign the MoU besides the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). This Foundation epitomizes the role of African structures that focus on the support to good practices at the highest level. It encourages responsible leadership through its Prize which

is awarded to a former Executive Head of State or Government by an independent Prize Committee composed of eminent figures, including two Nobel Peace Prize Laureates (<http://mo.ibrahim.foundation/prize/>)

This Prize has been awarded to leaders such as Pedro Pires (Cabo Verde), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Joaquim Chissano (Mozambique) and rewards contributions to the consolidation of democracy, social and economic stability. It sends in fact a very powerful message towards change and critical analysis of the continent's reality. At the same time, it lists the identification of opportunities and threats Africa is facing.

One of the main groups that it chooses to favour is youth. The Report "Africa at a Tipping Point" lists the many risks for the continent mostly due to the lack of opportunities for young people.

Considering that 60% of the population is under 25, the threats are as challenging as the opportunities.

Today, 60% of the continent population is already under 25 years of age. By 2050, Africa will be home to 452 million people under the age of 25. Their drive, ambition and potential provide African countries with an extraordinary asset. But this demographic dividend is at risk

of being squandered. (<http://mo.ibrahim.foundation/news/2017/creating-economic-opportunities-young-africans-continent-urgent-challenge>)

Prone to the impact of violence and terrorism, young people face a difficult future even though they show growing levels of literacy and access to higher education, often outside of the continent.

The extensive list of joint declarations, partnerships and agreements seem to cover all that is needed as far as the identification of strategic steps. Some case studies also help understand what can actually work through such programmes. As pointed out in the report quoted above under the DPADM, The Africa Governance Forum (AGF), The Africa Governance Inventory (AGI), The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the The Brussels Programme of Action (BPOA), just to name a few, show how much has been done through time (1997-2015) in order to cover convergence, monitoring and accountability in governance.

Though extensively ratified, other conventions, on Human Traffic, Environment and Cultural Heritage, are for different sets of reasons facing challenges that need more answers at the regional and continental level. (<http://www.africaprogresspanel.org/publications/policy-papers/2015-africa-progress-report/>)

Guiné-Bissau is, as I see it, and considering my experience of fieldwork in the country, a potential case study that can bring some light on the critical combination of challenges, threats and achievements in African countries today.

2. Guiné-Bissau: challenges and current situation

It is a fact that many countries are more obviously exposed to the many threats pointed out above. Guiné-Bissau has been dealing with extreme political unrest,

electoral problems due to ethnically and economically induced violence, corruption.

Seen as a failed state in western media and many international institutions, namely due to the exposition to the drug traffic, Guiné-Bissau represents a somehow radical case study concerning the premises exposed above.

If in fact the country has been struggling with recurrent conflicts, mostly politically based, it is also true that the response to this reality exists and is coming from a variety of sources. Such reaction, mostly cultural, is connected with activities pertaining community empowerment and youth movements.

These movements are present in particular in the reactions of bloggers, rappers, NGO leaders, film directors and musicians.

Bloggers and journalists such as Didinho, Adulai Djaló "Lai", Suleimane Djaló and Umoro Djau (see <http://bambaramdipadida.blogspot.pt>) have been pointing out the many dangers the country is facing and have also brought their claims to international attention. As Djau refers in a recent text

Thus, the challenge of finding all the root causes of our problems is on us, all of us. But, will you dare to look around and challenge yourself as a true patriot on behalf of every Bissau-Guinean, regardless of their social, cultural, and religious background or will you be willing to flush down the river everything for which all those people who came before us stood for, fought for, and lost their lives for? And finding all the root causes has to start with a true understanding of our social fabric - including values and assumptions - which gives meaning to our history and existence as a pluralistic nation. (<http://www.gbissau.com/2016/09/14/guinea-bissau-reflecting-on->

behalf-of-future-generations/)

In the words of Adulai Djaló the political independence has fallen short in its results due to the lack of commitment to the future generations.

A independência política sem a procura para a autogestão dos recursos (humanos e materiais) o país não se alavanca rumo a independência econômica, e muito menos sonha com a prosperidade. Triste é de constatar o futuro nebuloso para a sociedade guineense presente e para a geração vindoura. [Political Independence without the search for autonomous management of human and material resources will not drive the country towards economic independence and it will not allow prosperity. It is sad to see how the future is gloomy to the present Guinean society and to the generations to come] (<http://www.gbissau.com/2016/12/06/opiniao-desunidos-para-nos-autodestruirmos-e-adiar-o-futuro-da-geracao-vindoura/>)

Responding to a recent speech from the President, José Mário Vaz, in which he suggested that young people should go back to rural activities and the fields, to prevent foreigners from taking over, Djau challenged the timing of this idea, considering that what the country needs is in fact that opportunities are equally open to all regardless of their ethnic or socioeconomic origin.

This is a very relevant claim, since the cycles of poverty in Guiné-Bissau are directly related to the access to school, technology and resources, which are not usually as functional in rural areas. But in the President's mind, the occupation of the land seemed to be a key factor. Are the peoples of Guiné-Bissau going to forget where they came from as they move to the cities? It is very unlikely, so far the sense of belonging and cultural heritage is undisputed in this country.

Lineage is a fundamental matter and oral

history still keeps clear track of family and collective memory. (see Christoph Kohl: 2010, 92)

Still, the presence of foreigners does raise a lot of concerns in rural and fishing communities but that has a different expression as I expect to show ahead.

The "Lei de terra", concerning the regulation over its uses and property, seems to be in fact a strong expectation on the part of the population.

(see <http://www.radiojovem.info/2017/07/26/so-bre-os-jovens-o-regresso-ao-campo-a-lavoura-e-a-terra/>)

The political leadership is contested in what relates to the evolution of the country in the last 43 years (see Santos Fernandes: 2017) mainly by the new generations, educated in higher education institutions and often abroad. There are in fact more and more vocal accusations of a lack of democratic responsibility and values on the part of the successive governments.

Fernandes' work is based on interviews conducted by academics of Universidade Colinas de Boé to political leaders. Their conclusions: the struggle for power after the independence has been confused with the struggle for protagonism at all costs and these premises are stated as a warning to politicians.

3. Notes from the field

The importance of NGOs in Guiné-Bissau is very public and unquestionable. There are around 12 national organizations, and they cover the different areas that have been forgotten by the state: Education, Microcredit, Communication, Women's Empowerment, Handcraft, Environment, Land Ownership, Technologies.

One of the most successful areas of their intervention are the Rádio and TV Comunitárias. Their success is easy to explain. In fact, as listed in AD/Intervenção Comunitária(<http://www.adbissau.org/inte>

rvencao/comunicacao-comunitaria) there was a progressive appropriation and training on the part of the local communities of the equipment and its technical usage, with no calendar pre-established for the process. This allowed a natural order of management and it also left space for the suggestion of innovations and proposals.

These radios were not planned as an external resource but as a means for the communities to express themselves. Also, the presence of cultural values associated to these projects, conquered the “homens grandes” (traditional leaders) and determined their localized importance thereof.

The fact that young men and girls also got progressively involved in the management and control of the local radios was instrumental for the sustainability of these resources.

(see

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZOq_rC3jkM)

The success of the show of Rádio Kasumai born under this reality, “Bedjas na Manti”, for instance, became a national reference.

Due to the enthusiastic reception of the radios, the NGO AD (Acção para o Desenvolvimento) launched in 2001 the first Televisão Comunitária, TV Klélé.

As the local media pursue their role in guaranteeing social cohesion and sustainability (see Patrícia M. Paula: 2011) there are two other cases that should be pointed out as examples of how Guiné-Bissau is showing to be a dynamic country at the local level regardless of the difficult political situation and of the slow application of African Development Programmes.

The first case is Neram N'Dok, a community project in the Bijagó islands. It is an example of participatory governance set in the islands of Urok, a marine area protected but threatened by illegal fishing.

Conservation and traditional cultural practices ensure a sustainable model under the control of the locals. Neram N'Dok is also about gender equity and of how tradition and modernity come together to determine the best solutions for all and for the future generations.

Also concerning the Bijagós archipelago, the movie *Kadjike* (Sacred Forest), by film director Sana Na N'Hada, from 2013, though being a fictional work, is deeply rooted in collective beliefs and practices of the region. As Fernando Arenas points out the film focuses

on the clash between traditional Bijagó culture and the global drug trafficking network, the film is set in an atemporal place in harmony, according to Bijagó cosmogony, with God Nindo's creation. The natural landscape and the environment play a key role in the defense of its symbiotic relationship with traditional society and culture as the destructive forces of modernity intruded upon this pristine corner of the planet. According to the Bijagó creation myth—which is presented in voice-over by the Kriol-speaking narrator (Sana himself)—Acapacama, the original female inhabitant, founded the first village of Nocau. Before it was time for her to leave the world, she charged her four daughters with the care of tradition, the ocean, the forest, and the wind. Acapacama's heritage was to be protected by her descendants. The Bijagó society at the center of *Kadjike* not only lives in harmony with its natural ecosystem, but is also portrayed as an egalitarian society in terms of gender roles. (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/614578>).

In the words of the director himself “I didn't come into cinema because of

talent but because I felt obligated to tell certain stories. There has always been a question of necessity.”

(<http://africasacountry.com/2015/03/sana-na-nhada-guinea-bissaus-revolutionary-filmmaker-is-one-of-africas-most-important-directors-today/>).

Despite all the uncertainty facing his country today N'Hada remains hopeful about the future. As we speak, he is already turning his mind to his next feature, a film documenting the positive effects of independence in his homeland.

With *Luta Ca Caba Inda* (The Struggle is Not Over Yet), an ongoing project first shown in 2012, N'Hada may yet bequeath his most profound legacy to Guinean cinema. Along with Gomes [film director Flora Gomes] he has set out to find and make accessible the remains of raw film material made in the country after independence but either lost or damaged in the era of political upheaval. (Idem)

Sana Na N'Handa and his work are a very good example to illustrate how Africa's intellectuals and communities are taking in their hands the solutions to problems, through self-determination and their own definition and interpretation of progress.