

Harnessing Culture for Sustainable Development and Human Security in Africa

Foreword

by
Sir John Daniel

It is an honour to provide a short foreword to this fascinating and diverse set of essays, which is a contribution of the Institute for African Culture and International Understanding to the celebration of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversities.

There are almost thirty contributions in this collection and they approach the issues of sustainable development and human security from an impressive number of directions. What are the common threads that make the whole book greater than the sum of its parts? Over at least the last 30 years governments, scholars, practitioners and intergovernmental organisations like UNESCO and the World Bank have devoted enormous energy to identifying assured routes to sustainable development and human security: what have we learned and what does this authentically African contribution add?

Peter Okebukola sets the stage by arguing that sustainable development and lasting human security require the proactive engagement of people to increase their capacities through education and the development of useful knowledge. The discovery of abundant valuable natural resources can provide a welcome boost to employment and national budgets, but all resources eventually run out. Moreover, absent an effective political framework for exploiting these riches, the drive for development and security can actually go into reverse as the powerful pocket the benefits and the weak remain poor.

A recent article on Africa in *The Economist* newspaper was entitled ‘The twilight of the resource curse?’ It reported how developments in financial services, manufacturing and construction are now taking over from commodities as the principal drivers of economic growth across Africa. Moreover foreign investment as a proportion of GDP is now higher in resource-poor states than in those that are resource rich. Even in Nigeria services now represent 60% of GDP and mobile phones and banks are fuelling growth. The article concludes: ‘with better education systems, investment in infrastructure and sensible regulatory reforms, the continent could completely break the spell that has held it back to often in the past’.

Many of these papers address the challenge of creating strategies to implement that advice: strategies that blend indigenous African culture and knowledge with the universal lessons drawn from human political development from prehistoric times. In his masterly two-volume work, *The Origins of Political Order* and *Political Order and Political Decay*, Francis Fukuyama identifies three basic elements of political order: the rule of law, democracy, and accountability. He describes how these elements have evolved since tribal times, shows that few countries have yet achieved a stable blend of all three, and

warns that even when it appears to be attained, only vigilance can make political order sustainable.

Fukuyama also shows that these elements of political order long predate the rise of Europe and the West. Tribal societies had strong notions of democracy and accountability, whilst rule *by* law – if not the rule *of* law – originated in China. The challenge for Africa, as for all contemporary societies, is to base its development on a combination of democracy, accountability and the rule of law that creates a sustainable political order to underpin human security.

Despite various attempts to introduce foreign models of industrial development to Africa it appears that today the informal economy is the most successful component of Africa's development. This sector of the economy owes much to indigenous knowledge and also relies heavily on women. Several papers in this book urge for a genuinely grassroots approach that, by creating a supportive and enabling environment, empowers individual Africans to make a greater contribution to development and security.

In this context various authors urge the importance of bringing young people and women more fully into the processes of cultural, political and economic development. In the case of youth, Fred Awaah argues for the importance of involving youth directly in the resolution of indigenous conflicts since young people, because of their energy and numbers, will otherwise intensify whatever conflicts start. It may seem ironic that Africa, which has a particularly young demography, has been so slow to harness the potential of youth in positive ways.

One paper, however, suggests that intergenerational conflict may be a special challenge in Africa, partly because change has been so rapid. Despite appearances, for example the infatuation of the young with imported information technology, it may be that the older generation has done more to slow Africa's development by adopting insidious foreign habits like the autocratic use of power. If so, these older vested interests, which abhor the democratization of knowledge and the notion of accountability because they hope to maintain their positions of dominance, will have to be confronted, persuaded or outwitted in order to implement the many excellent ideas that recur throughout this book.

My own thinking about development and security owes much to the writings of Amartya Sen and his notion of development as freedom. He means by this that sustainable development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. This broad process embraces all narrower views of development such as growth of individual incomes, facilities for education and health care, civil rights, technological progress and social modernisation. Viewing development as the expansion of freedoms puts the focus on the purposes that make development important rather than on some of the means of achieving it.

Such a view sits very comfortably with the notion of harnessing culture for sustainable development and human security in Africa that is the theme of this book. Freedom is central to the process of development for two distinct but complementary reasons. The first is evaluative: the primary assessment of the process of development is whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced. The ability to be true to one's own culture is a fundamental freedom. The second reason is effectiveness, because the achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people. People will exercise that agency more fully if their actions can flow with the grain of their culture.

This book is full of ideas, applicable to many areas of life in Africa, to advance sustainable development and human security in this spirit. I congratulate the editors and authors warmly on the rich material that they have assembled. As a former senior official at UNESCO it gives me great pleasure that they have put this volume together to celebrate the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversities.

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