



# Africa: signs of hope?

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## **Abstract**

### **Africa: signs of hope?**

*The dawning of the 21st century generally brought new hope to African leaders and countless thousands of ordinary citizens of many countries on the continent. The first signs of a new turn of events shone through by the end of the last decade of the previous century. This was manifested by economic growth rates that started to pick up in a number of African states, by pro-democracy movements which in country after country succeeded in replacing authoritarian regimes, and by the winding down and termination of some of Africa's most devastating wars.*

*The results of this analysis confirm the above-mentioned positive political, economic and conflict trends in Africa. It is clearly a significant turn of events given the well-known political and economic predicament with which Africa is struggling. When this negative legacy and Cold War background of Africa is considered, the importance of present developments is clear to see. The identified heightened sense of purpose among the leaders and peoples of Africa and the changed mood and need among Africans to take charge of their own future that found expression in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) are indeed significant and bode well for the future of the continent.*

*A word of warning here is, however, necessary. Our conduct with Africa must be very cautious and we must guard against over-optimism and the exaggerated belief that Africa is now on a trajectory of sustained development and peace. We cannot generalise about Africa – for that the continent is just too big*

*and diverse from a geographical, cultural, economic and political point of view.*

## **Opsomming**

### **Afrika: tekens van hoop?**

*Die aanbreek van die 21e eeu het nuwe hoop en vooruitsigte vir Afrika se leiers en sy mense gebring. Die eerste tekens van 'n verandering het na vore begin tree teen die einde van die laaste dekade van die 20e eeu. Dit het gemanifesteer in beter ekonomiese groeikoerse in talle Afrikastate, in pro-demokrasiebewegings wat in een na die ander staat daarin geslaag het om outhoritêre bewinde te vervang, en deur die feit dat talle van Afrika se ergste oorloë begin taan het en selfs stopgesit is.*

*Die resultate van hierdie studie bevestig dat bogenoemde positiewe politieke, ekonomiese en konfliktendense inderdaad besig is om plaas te vind. Dit verteenwoordig 'n belangrike en betekenisvolle verloop van gebeure, veral gegewe die bekende politieke en ontwikkelingsdilemma waarin Afrika hom sedert sy toetrede tot die internasionale politiek bevind. Die groter doelgerigtheid wat tans onder Afrikaleiers heers, asook 'n duideliker behoeftte by gewone Afrikane om groter beheer oor hulle lewe en omstandighede te probeer verkry, is bemoedigend. Hierdie veranderde gesindheid het onder andere uitdrukking gevind in die Nuwe Bondgenoodskap vir Afrika se Ontwikkeling (NEPAD). Dit is betekenisvol en voorspel goeie dinge vir die toekoms.*

*Met Afrika moet egter versigtig omgegaan word en daar moet gewaak word teen ooroptimisme en die oordrewe verwagting dat Afrika nou op 'n trajek van volgehoue vooruitgang en vrede is. Oor Afrika kan daar nie veralgemeen word nie – daarvoor is die kontinent uit 'n geografiese, kulturele, ekonomiese en politieke oogpunt net té groot en divers.*

## **1. Introduction**

Africa's history since independence, and after its integration into the international community as a large group of developing states, was characterised by general political instability, low quality of governance (Mills, 2002:90) and a seemingly unending string of wars (international and civil) (Calderisi, 2006:4; Mkwezalamba & Chinyama, 2007:2). This, along with other factors like overpopulation, disease, unpredictable climate changes, volatile international markets and large scale corruption, have contributed vastly to the lack of economic growth and prosperity on the continent. This result in the

early 21st century of Africa being officially rated as the poorest continent on earth (Calderisi, 2006:87-90; Mills, 2002:86).

It is thus quite encouraging that observers of the development problem in Africa recently make mention of progress being made on the continent regarding political and economic integration efforts. This observation is generally based on the role of the African Union (AU) and its emphasis on continental integration within the framework of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (Mkwezalamba & Chinyama, 2007:2). During the last decade certain changes (trends) are also being observed with regard to war and economic development in Africa. Comparatively, less major wars are occurring on a year-to-year basis and a growing number of states are actually achieving positive economic growth results.

The aim of this article is to identify and analyse these changes (also the lessening of major wars) more closely in terms of their nature and the possible reason thereof. The significance of the investigation lies in the reality of the generally dismal socio-economic and political circumstances associated with the majority of states on the continent. Therefore, the focus will first fall on the scale of Africa's political and economic dilemma/predicament. It is only logical to content that the lessening, and ideally, the termination of major wars in Africa, is an important condition for future development and integration into a globalising world economy on a larger scale than is presently the case.

## **2. The predicament of Africa**

At the start of the 21st century more than 13% of the world's population lived in Africa (Anon., 2008a), which gave the continent a total estimated population of 936 million in the year 2007. The growth rate of the population in Africa is 2,08% a year in contrast to the growth rate in Europe which is -0,01% and in Latin America where it is 2% (Anon., 2008b).

At the same time, the average annual GNP growth of Africa was until recently only about 1% which made Africa the continent with the lowest economic growth rate and which has thus lagged far behind in modernisation (Anon., 2008a). In fact, on average by the middle of the present decade (2005), Africa was poorer than it was 25 years ago. Overall, the continent experienced a growth decline from 5% in 1973 to 1% in 2002, concurrent with a decline in investment productivity from 25% to 5%. This makes Africa a poverty stricken continent with 40% of its sub-Saharan population living on

less than US\$1 a day (Mills, 2002:105-106; Bank Information Centre, 2008).

Any analysis of Africa's problematic political and economic situation should also consider the ethnic and language diversity found on the continent. This can be regarded as part of the explanation for the political instability and lack of economic growth in Africa. In this regard the fact is that more than 3 000 distinct ethnic groups have been classified on the continent and more than 2 000 languages are spoken (Anon., 2008a). Seven of the ten most linguistically diverse countries in the world are African.

This ethnic and language diversity in countries form the basis of major political and economic inequalities and power struggles, and of course, contribute to ethnic conflict (Kenar, 2008:8). A theory of conflict put together by Lakes and Rothchild (1996:42) suggested that in weak states (of which Africa has many)<sup>1</sup> there is always the temptation for leaders and elites to act with bias, favouring a particular ethnic group, with the resultant protest and conflict flowing from that.

Significantly, all of the above mentioned diversity are unequally divided and confined within the borders of 53 independent political entities of which less than five consist of ethnically homogeneous populations. In other words, the large majority of African states created by the European colonial powers, were ethnically heterogeneous with initially artificial borders, which often cut across cultural, tribal, linguistic and religious borders. Of course, these artificial borders created and contributed to ethnic and religious strife and conflict, not only *in* states, but also *between* countries (Thomson, 2000:13).

Again, any attempt to picture Africa's troubled position in the world will be incomplete without also mentioning two other determinants contributing to the continents poverty and volatility: *disease* and *political* instability (combined with *corruption* in governance). With regard to the issue of disease, Africa, specifically Africa south of the Sahara, is the region in the world most affected by HIV and AIDS (AVERT., 2008). It is known that the political and socio-economic

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1 Weak states are characterised by a lack of capacity for effective action across a range of state functions. They typically have inefficient and corrupt administrative structures that are not capable of maintaining social order and personal security (Heywood, 2007:105).

consequences of this pandemic are devastating and far-reaching. For example, in many countries decades of progress made in extending life expectancy is erased. Millions of adults are dying of AIDS while still young and this has an impact on the labour force, households and enterprises, which together acted as a brake on economic growth and development (AVERT., 2008).

Secondly, since independence, African states have been hampered by political instability, corruption, and violence. An indication of this is that during the period from 1960 to 2001 Africa had experienced 145 *coup* plots that proceeded no further than the plot stage, 109 *coup* attempts that failed, and 82 successful *coups* (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002:13-14; Thomson, 2000:123). This means that few states in Africa have been able to sustain democratic governments. The political instability reflected by these statistics, together with poor economic performance, are further directly responsible for the rising trends of conflict in Africa during the last three decades (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002:23).

Simultaneously, corruption is costing Africa more than \$148 billion a year, something that is manifesting itself on all levels of state life (Blunt, 2002:2) and which makes corruption in Africa the worst in the world, including widespread bribery and graft. Therefore, Calderisi (2006:208-209) argues that the world's greatest gift to Africa's democrats would be the prevention of the amassing of illegal fortunes in foreign banks by politicians and senior officials. Of course, this has hindered development on the continent hugely and is a clear indication of a failure of leadership in Africa. The seriousness of the issue of corruption is so majestic that it has recently been described by a prominent African statesman "... as a bigger threat to Africa's development than Aids" (Wrong, 2005). No wonder then that the view developed, as Perry (2009:34) described it, that "... if Africa generates any kind of growth it is in suffering – and in the overseas aid sent to address that, now a \$40 billion-a-year industry".

The given background and the issue-ridden condition of Africa reflected in the above background is so severe that it is hardly possible to imagine that something constructive can flow from it. And yet, that is exactly what started to happen less than two decades ago.

### 3. Manifestations of change in Africa

Since the end of the Cold War in 1990, signs abound of a process of democratisation seemingly starting to take root in Africa.<sup>2</sup> During the past four years (2004-2007), more than 50 democratic elections were held in Africa and in 2008 close to 75% of sub-Saharan states were classified by Freedom House<sup>3</sup> as "free" or "partly free" (Moss, 2008:2). This percentage of free and partly free states in Africa declined to 70% in 2009. In spite of this the relatively high number of electoral democracies in Africa points to a tendency of democratisation on the continent, a process that started to manifest itself towards the end of 1997. Cilliers (2009:11) confirms this inclination towards democracy in Africa by pointing to the same election statistics mentioned above and by adding the significant fact that most of these elections are peaceful.

However, Diamond (2008:38-39) warns against an euphoria about democratic elections as such. He is of the opinion that for a country to be really democratic, it must have more than regular, multiparty elections under a civilian constitutional order. A number of countries in the South world<sup>4</sup> presently regarded as democracies are actually not qualifying for this label because of a number of possible reasons: lack of freedom for the electorate to advocate, associate, contest, and campaign properly before a specific election; unfair and elite controlled electoral administrations and unbalanced access to the media (Diamond, 2008:39). Consequently, in many developing and postcommunist countries democracy is regarded as a superficial phenomenon, "... blighted by multiple forms of bad governance" (Diamond, 2008:38).

In the above criticism Diamond is actually repeating a view formerly expressed where he distinguishes between liberal democracy and mere "electoral democracy". In liberal democracies there is "... ex-

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2 Early indications of this trend was the 124 multiparty elections, 54 presidential and 70 legislative elections that were held by December 1997 (Esterhuysen, 1998:43).

3 Freedom House is an independent, New York-based, nongovernmental organisation that has been monitoring political rights and civil liberties worldwide since 1972 (Freedom house, 2009). Its ratings are widely used for discerning global trends in democratisation.

4 *South World* or *Global South* is a term which is used more and more frequently instead of "Third World" to refer to the less-developed countries located primarily in the Southern hemisphere (Kegley & Wittkopf, 2004:191).

tensive provision for political and civic pluralism as well as for individual and group freedoms" (Burnell, 2005:187). The shortcomings of electoral democracy is described as a system where civil freedoms are less important and minority rights are in danger of being compromised.

Apart from the indicated trend regarding democratisation and political change in Africa there is substantial proof that Africa, until recently, has been going through a period of economic resurgence as well. The estimated annual growth rate in Africa for 2004 to 2008 was around 6,5%, with inflation lower than 10% (Moss, 2008:2; Perry, 2009:34). Furthermore, the indicated success was not exclusively associated with countries in Africa endowed with large oil reserves. About 24 sub-Saharan African countries have until recently been growing in excess of 5% (Moss, 2008:2). Given the international economic downturn which started to occur in the second half of 2008, it can be expected that such high growth rates will not be sustained.

The question is, why did economic growth started to manifest in Africa only during the first decade of the 21st century after more than 50 years of very low or no growth at all. It seems that a host of factors are responsible for this changed state of affairs. Firstly, there was a drastic rise in the price of commodities which coincided with macro-economic reforms inside Africa undertaken during the past decade. Even now, commodity prices are higher than they were in the 1990s (Perry, 2009:34). Secondly, the mentioned reforms was supported by international assistance and encouragement. This have brought down inflation and improved the investment climate. Thirdly, foreign investment in Africa picked up during the last five to eight years.<sup>5</sup> This was led by oil, gas, and mining, but trends in other sectors, such as telecommunications, agribusiness, and business services were also, until recently, important determining factors (Moss, 2008:2). Added to this is at least some indications of African professionals returning to their countries of origin.

The decline of civil and international wars in Africa during the last five years is also important and directly beneficial to economic development (Harbom & Wallensteen, 2007:80). For a very long time

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5 In 2006, foreign investment in Africa reached \$49 billion, overtaking foreign aid for the first time (Perry, 2009:34). The reason for this is relatively simple: economic confidence in Africa slowly improved during the last decade because of a decline in wars and a simultaneous growth in democracy.

these wars were probably the most devastating and visible destructive forces on the continent. Changes in this regard are observed, however, which also contributed to positive economic growth in the affected countries. Wars that have been terminated lead to improved circumstances in which large numbers of refugees and displaced persons can be better administered and thousands of these displaced people can possibly even go back to their countries of origin. It is mainly because of the devastation of these wars that Africa is regarded as a tragedy in the modern world (Kissinger, 2001:210). Generally speaking, however, changed circumstances are developing in Africa which might be the start of a new phase in the continents history.

#### 4. Major wars in Africa

It has been mentioned earlier that Africa's recent history has been characterised by a large number of interstate and intrastate wars. This has indeed slowed down the spreading of democracy, economic liberalisation and freedom in different regions of Africa (Ayittey, 2006:369-372). Some of these conflicts were branded as of the toughest to settle in the world like the civil war in Sudan, the oldest conflict in Africa. In order to get a clearer perspective on major wars in Africa it is important to look comparatively at the global picture regarding this matter.

The large majority of new conflicts after 1990 occurred in the South world and these were almost exclusively intrastate in nature. With regard to the involvement of the great powers of the North world<sup>6</sup> in the conflicts of the South world their engagement were predominantly in the context of multilateral peace operations (Bailes, 2005:15).

Globally, seventeen *major armed conflicts*<sup>7</sup> were active in 2006, of which three were in Africa, three in the America's, three in the Mid-

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6 A concept used to refer to the wealthy industrialised countries located primarily in the Northern hemisphere (Kegley & Wittkopf, 2004:17).

7 The UCDP's (Uppsala Conflict Data Program) definition for *major armed conflict* is used in this article, namely:

... a contested incompatibility concerning government and/or territory over which the use of armed force between the military forces of two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, has resulted in at least 1 000 battle-related deaths in a single calendar year (Dwan & Holmqvist, 2005: 83).

dle East, and seven in Asia (Harbom & Wallensteen, 2007:79). For 2005 the number of major armed conflict in Africa were also three, a decrease of two from 2004 (Cote d'Ivoire, the DRC, and the Sudan) (UN, 2005:3). Unfortunately, a number of other countries are still experiencing civil strife of a lower intensity, involving ethnic and religious violence.

When the period of 1997-2006 is taken into account, data showed that Africa was the arena of fourteen major armed conflicts. In fact, during the two years of 1998 and 1999 the highest number of conflicts were fought in Africa, namely eleven in each year. This number went down to nine in 2000 and eight in 2001. Fortunately, this decline in conflict was kept up since then to the all time low of three in 2006 (Harbom & Wallensteen, 2007:80).

Interestingly, this decline in the number of major armed conflict in Africa corresponded closely with the global trend over the same period. Only one of the above mentioned conflicts in Africa was of an interstate nature – the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia (Harbom & Wallensteen, 2007:80). However, in spite of the positive trend observed in Africa during the last decade, it is clear that the continent represents one of the main areas of major armed conflict in the post-Cold War world.

There is another significant aspect related to the positive trend mentioned, namely, that according to Harbom and Wallensteen (2007:80), the vast majority of the major armed conflicts in Africa in the period 1990-2006 concerned governmental power and were not conflicts between national ethnic or religious groups. On the whole, neither governments nor opponents challenge existing frontiers; what they fight about were the way in which governmental power were used and for what purposes.

Again, the question arises what the possible reasons might be for the indicated decline of conflict in Africa. Firstly, constructive external involvement must again be mentioned. In these cases military interventions by UN multilateral peacekeeping forces is an important factor to keep in mind as they are involved in most of these major conflicts (Rourke & Boyer, 2006:284). Secondly, there are the involvement of North world countries (especially the G-8) by way of diplomacy, economic investment and general foreign aid (Calderisi, 2006:157). Because of this there is constant pressure from donor states for positive results, for peace and stability, economic growth and development. Thirdly, there are the already mentioned political

transformation and democratisation that took place in many African states during 1990-2007 (see discussion under 3).

However, the changes taking shape in Africa's political and economic landscapes are by no means only externally driven. The impact of The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) must also be taken into account. NEPAD, as initiated by former President Thabo Mbeki and his fellow leaders in Africa (Presidents Olusegun Obasanyo of Nigeria and Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal), assisted in creating a new perspective on the issues of the continent. The NEPAD undertakings to respect international standards of democracy, the institution of a peer review mechanism and the aim of promoting greater regional integration and trade among African states, for instance, are viewed as very positive objectives. The policy framework which NEPAD has put in place is aimed at accelerating economic cooperation and integration among African countries. In principle, this can add to the possible improvement of a dire situation on the continent (Anon., 2008c). However, Ayittey (2006:317) does not agree with this positive assessment of NEPAD and regard it as "... fatally flawed in many ways".

In clarifying his view Ayittey (2006:317) argued that African leaders, through NEPAD, are actually badgering the Western world with what he called "... the same old colonialism claptrap", as reasons why Africa has not developed sufficiently during the last 50 years. According to him, it is not the Western world that purposefully marginalised Africa, African leaders themselves have marginalised their continent. More than anything else, Africa's underdevelopment was caused by a host of *internal factors* like neglect of agriculture, civil wars, crumbling infrastructure, and misguided socialist policies (Arittey, 2006:319).

Secondly, there is an apparent contradiction in the official NEPAD document when on the one hand it refers to "self-reliance" and "masters of their own destiny", while on the other hand, as Ayittey (2006:320) observed, the NEPAD plan "... is a cleverly designed vehicle to extract more foreign aid and credit" from the Western world. Lastly, NEPAD was created without any consultation with any civic group on the continent. Most governments and civil society organisations in Africa first heard about NEPAD from the Western media when President Thabo Mbeki presented it at the World Economic Forum in 2001. This is one of the main reasons why Ayittey (2006:322) is of the opinion that NEPAD will not succeed as a development plan.

In spite of Ayittey's critique it cannot be denied that NEPAD did indeed play a positive role in exposing Africa to the world and in communicating Africa's issues and needs to the international community with a simultaneous successful call for foreign aid.

The growing economic involvement in Africa of the rising Eastern powers, India and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), became more visible with each passing year since 2000. This is important and can be described as factors having a direct influence on conflict and economic changes in Africa. With regard to China's relations with Africa the end of the Cold War was especially characterised by a massive increase in Sino-African trade and investment, which has made China a major player in contemporary Africa's development (Naidu & Edinger, 2007:315). Between 2000 and 2005 Africa's exports to China increased at an annual rate of 48%, two and a half times faster than the rate of the continent's exports to the United States, and four times faster than the rate of its exports to the European Union over the same period (Broadman, 2008:95). This is indeed compelling evidence that Africa is now changing from an aid destination to business destination.

It is unfortunate that at this point in time much of this economic activity between Asia and Africa involve only a few African countries and is focused on the extractive industries, namely oil and mining. Increasingly though, business from China and India are also targeting other economic sectors in Africa: rapidly modernising industries, importing of Africa's light manufactured products like household consumer goods, processed foods, and making use of services like tourism and telecommunications (Broadman, 2008:96). The important point is that African leaders fully realised that the prospects created by Chinese and Indian business is contingent on the implementation of difficult reforms. This asks from African governments to enhance their companies' international competitiveness, foster better governance, improve their countries' financial and labour markets, and attract investment in infrastructure. There is, in other words, pressure on Africa's governments to stop the wars on the continent and to create a more stable and peaceful environment within which the prosperity of Africa's population can be advanced. Africa's wars have for much too long impacted negatively on itself and on the rest of the international community. The needless devastation of economies and infrastructure, the killing of thousands of innocent people, and the resultant poverty and refugee flows, are in the process of being curbed (Le Roux, 2008:19). Africa is changing.

## 5. Conclusion

As the case is with many states and regions around the world Africa also finds itself caught up in a process of a major political and economic transformation as part of its post-Cold War history. Important aspects of this change in Africa were highlighted, namely political democratisation, economic development, the decline in the occurrence of major wars with an indication of possible reasons for this positive trends. However, this does not imply that peace has broken out all over Africa accompanied by sustained economic development in the majority of countries. On the contrary, other types of political violence, like the unilateral use of armed force and unorganised/spontaneous public violence, are still a daily occurrence in many states. In some countries of Africa there are also violence that are not directed at the state (rebel groups fighting each other). The point is that these other types of violence are also important contributors to the lack of development on the continent. Historically speaking, it was the combined results of these conflicts that created the image of Africa as a colossal disaster.

In the light of the discussed indications of positive developments in Africa during the last two decades, the temptation is high to predict that Africa is now on the verge of a new era in its history. And yet, given the many challenges that the continent is facing, and taking into account the present global economic downturn, pessimism is still high regarding Africa's ability to grow economically in a sustained way and to achieve the goals of good governance and responsible government.

Still, until now, a lot of effort were put into laying the foundation of a more prosperous African continent. The present clear signs of Africa being on a positive trajectory in terms of conflict resolution, democratisation, and economic development, are a direct result of these peace building efforts. The final goal is positive peace in Africa, harmony within and between states, based on the example of the European Union. However, past experience has taught us that all of the positive developments presently experienced in Africa, are *extremely fragile*. It is not possible to predict the extend and sustainability of the positive changes taking place in Africa at the moment. Hopefully, African governments will continue to implement the goals they have set for themselves at the African Union summit of 2005 as part of the NEPAD scheme to reposition Africa in the world – goals like the active reduction of poverty, economic growth, good governance, strengthening of democratic institutions and working towards lasting peace and security across the continent (Blair, 2005:2.) Hopefully,

this is what is presently observed on the continent as part of a long term process of changing the fate of Africa's suffering millions.

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### **Key concepts:**

Africa  
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political and economic trends  
transformation, political  
wars, major

### **Kernbegrippe:**

Afrika  
demokratisering  
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politieke en ekonomiese tendense  
transformasie, politieke