

THE PROBLEM OF ECO-DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN AN ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

*Hassan Omari Kaya
and
Soraya Maleka*

Abstract

This paper argues that eco-development is about the peasant's environment and resource sustainability, rural self-reliance and risk minimization, and the role of culture and indigenous technology in rural development in Africa. Conservation and sustainability of resources is a top priority to the life of a peasant producer. Of critical importance is the value of bringing about self-sustaining improvements that the peasant/community understands and appreciates. Planning and implementation must, therefore, involve the peasant and the community.

Introduction

One dimension of development which has not attracted the attention it deserves from development scientists in Africa is that of ecodevelopment. This is due to the fact that it tends to have a different emphasis from the one favoured by conventional development scientists. The latter are sector oriented with a heavy bias on formal economic sector activities, forgetting the fact that the majority of the rural people in Africa live outside the formal economic sector. They produce their own food, construct their own houses and raise their future generations without a financial evaluation of these efforts (Harrison, 1987; Mascarenhas, 1984).

Ecodevelopment as a rural development policy and strategy is about the peasant's environment and his resource sustainability. It is about rural self-reliance and risk minimization. It is about the role of indigenous technology and culture in rural development. It begins with an appreciation and understanding of the realities of the African peasant's environment as they are and not what they ought to be (Ake, 1991; Harrison, 1987).

The majority of the rural people still live in a physical and socio-economic environment in which natural resources such as soil, water, human and animal labour are the major inputs of production. The basic physical needs such as food and shelter are generated locally. Therefore, the conservation and sustainability of these resources are of top priority to the African peasant producer.

Poverty, squalor and diseases are not incidentals but realities in the daily lives of these poor African masses. Unfortunately, various studies indicate that development aid has often tried to tackle these problems in a context which is alien to the recipient and in some cases even contradictory to the stated objectives of development. This implies that development assistance programmes will have value and a chance of bringing about sustained development if the community in which the changes are to take place understands what is being done and if it can guard its own interests (Mascarenhas, 1984).

The General Weaknesses of the Past and Existing Rural Development Policies and Strategies

The rural masses of Africa have been subjected to difference and sometimes very conflicting conceptions of development since their countries achieved political independence. These conceptions can be grouped into two main perspectives, i.e development as "Economic Growth" of the 1960s and development as "Welfare" of the 1970s and 1980s.

The first one is the dominant bourgeois conceptualization of development. It came with the rise of capitalism in Europe and America. It looks at development in terms of increasing the gross domestic product, associated with the capitalization of production. It assumes a linear progression of development from lower to higher levels. The benefits of this process were then expected to "trickle down" from the richer classes to the poor ones.

In reality, however, capitalist growth is neither linear nor even. It is dialectical and uneven. Out of this unevenness arises social inequalities and poverty. Some sections of society having too much power and wealth whereas others have little or none. The inherent tendency of capitalism, therefore, is towards concentration of wealth and power and not a trickle down effect. Just as with the exploitation of society, capitalism also exploits and misuses the natural environment. This leads to waste and degradation of the environment.

The transformation and approaches to rural development in the 1960s in Tanzania and other parts of Africa, through the advice of the World Bank, are examples of the conceptualization of development as "economic growth".

The strategies used to bring about rural change were: the promotion of rural cooperation; agricultural extension services, community development programmes and establishment of new rural settlement schemes. Both approaches were justified by an appeal to the modernization theory which viewed the African peasants as primitive, backward and generally inferior human beings (Coulson, 1982).

The approaches failed because of a number of reasons: first, the cooperatives were based on compulsion, hence undemocratic. Besides this, they were inefficient and corrupt (Migot-Adholla, 1969). Second, the choice of the crops recommended for the farmers by the extension workers were not appropriate for the area. Third, much of the advice given by extension workers was not appropriate for small farmers. For instance, they tried to

persuade the small farmers to plant their crops in pure stands whereas through their own long experience the small farmers have come to realize the advantages of inter-cropping, i.e planting more than one crop in a field. These advantages include the following: plants with different types of roots do not compete for nutrients; labour saving in weeding; and minimization of risk if one of the crops fails.

The idea of community development was to soften up traditional communities which were resisting the cash economy. Much of the community development work under the transformation and improvement approaches were complementary to extension and cooperative policies. They were meant to produce the most efficient agricultural producers who would understand the value and use of cooperative societies as a means of marketing agricultural crops and obtaining government credit. There was, however, one important difference, half of the community development staff were women. Their activity was directed towards introducing peasant women to Western capitalist values on child-rearing, cooking, eating and health. This type of work was obviously too manipulative to be successful. The rationale for community development programmes was that techniques were to be concentrated in areas where a change in individual attitude of peasant farmers had to be brought about in order to gain a response to technical advice. The community development officer was sent to foster among peasants a desire for higher standards of living and to teach them how they might achieve this technology while at the same time giving them low prices for their products. The struggle against ignorance and diseases was thus presented as one against old traditions and for a "modern" way of life whose incarnation was the European.

The transformation approach and its accompanying settlement schemes, on the other hand, was based on the argument that when traditional people are moved to new areas they are likely to be more receptive to change than when they remain in their familiar surroundings. The objective of this was to increase production of cash crops so that the government could earn foreign exchange.

Coulson (1982) looks at the transformation approach as a desperate reaction on the part of the government and international capital to peasant resistance to be assimilated into capitalist production. If there was no other way of making him grow more cash crops, then the last hope was to take him away from his "traditional" surroundings to settlement schemes where in return for land, he/she could be made to follow the instructions of the agricultural staff.

The failure and limitations of the new settlement schemes under the transformation approach were summarized by the then President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere in the following words:

When we tried to promote rural development in the past, we sometimes spent huge sums of money on establishing a settlement, and supplying it with modern equipment, and social services as well as often providing it with a management hierarchy We acted on the assumption that there was a short cut to development in these rural areas ... We persuaded people to go to new settlements by promising them that they could quickly grow rich there In effect, we said that capital equipment would lead to increased output, and this would lead to a transformation in the lives of the people involved. The people were secondary; the first priority was the output. As a result, there have been very many cases where heavy capital investment has resulted in no increase in output - where the investment has been wasted ... the majority of the people who went to settle lost their enthusiasm, and either left the scheme altogether or failed to carry out the orders of the outsiders who were not themselves involved in the success or failure of the project (Nyerere, 1968).

It can be explained that the welfare approach to development was also basically capitalist. In order to accommodate working class demands the capitalist state takes a reformist approach by removing the excesses of the system while preserving the essentials. This is the social democratic solution to the inequalities caused by "pure capitalism". The so-called mixed economy approach to development is not part of a socialist programme but capitalist programme. It is capitalism with state intervention to remove its excesses. Hence in the 1970s and 1980s came a shift in development policy to "growth with equity". The primary emphasis of development effort was still economic growth. The main difference, however, was the realization that the social costs of economic growth should be taken into account in the planning process rather than handling them in an adhoc manner as in the 1960s. As a result of this social policy acquired a respectable consideration in economic policy. Rural development strategies such as the integrated rural development

programmes of the 1970s and 1980s fall under the welfare approach to development.

Various criticisms have been levelled at the integrated rural development programmes: the multi-component projects came to be very cost-intensive; most of the projects were dependent on foreign aid. The viability of the projects were in danger in the long-run because the respective African governments could not bear the recurrent costs once the foreign aid was terminated.

Another limitation was in the planning and administration. In most cases special administrative units staffed with foreign experts were set up. Administration tended to collapse when the foreign aid period was terminated. A recent World Bank and other Foreign aid project evaluations in Africa have indicated that the integrated rural development programmes were among the least successful project types (Schulz, 1991; Kaya, 1985). In spite of all these policy strategy modifications taken by the African governments and international aid donors, the impoverishment of the African rural masses continued to increase in the 1980s up to the 1990s.

The World Bank is currently back to the conceptualization of development as economic growth through policy strategies such as structural adjustment programmes. Instead of "equity" the World Bank is now putting emphasis on saving those who will be victims of the structural adjustment.

Ecodevelopment and the Importance of Building on the Indigenous.

The term "ecodevelopment" was first coined by Maurine Strong, the first Director of The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It was introduced during the first meeting of its Administrative Board in July 1973 in Geneva. Ecodevelopment embraces the rational use of natural resources, the application of appropriate technology and the use of social and political forms of organization that take the existing ecosystem and local culture into account.

The goal is to pursue a socio-economic development process that relies for the most part on indigenous human and natural resources and strives to satisfy the basic needs of the population.

Ecodevelopment, therefore, advocates an alternative concept of development. It is both a policy and a strategy of development. As a policy it contains the following elements: first, the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poorest

sections of the population, the majority of whom live in the rural areas; second, great use of indigenous human and natural resources (self-reliance); long-term preservation of the ecological basis of development, i.e environmental compatibility.

Ecodevelopment as a rural development strategy involves: the introduction of environmentally sound and energy saving farming methods (ecological); achievement of a sufficient level of individual income in both monetary and subsistence terms; the improvement of the employment situation by creating new jobs; the compatibility with tradition and sets of value; the inclusion of the population groups involved by having them participate in the project (Glaeser, 1984).

The Importance of Building on the Indigenous

Ake (1991) points out that development process in Africa cannot be advanced unless those involved in this process take seriously the realities of the African societies as they are and not what they ought to be. This implies that sustainable development in the rural areas can only be realized if it is based on the indigenous. According to him, to the indigenous is not necessarily what is traditional but whatever the poor rural masses regard to be an authentic expression of themselves.

The above means that it is what the targeted rural community considers to be important which should determine the form and content of a development policy and strategy. This is what is meant by building on the indigenous. Building on the indigenous has a number of advantages: first, it leads to a development paradigm radically different from the previous rural development strategies. It is one which is democratic and particular, and gives primacy to the interests, values and aspirations of the targeted community.

Studies argue that political authoritarianism and coercion in Africa have greatly contributed to the failure of development. They have led to the dissociation of development from social needs. This is due to the fact that decision-making has been dominated by interests which are often in conflict with public good. African leaders have failed to mobilize the rural masses' energy and support. They have only succeeded in compelling them to conformity. The result of which is the undermining of people's traditional capacity to cope with their difficult socio-economic and physical environment (Ake, 1991; Mazrui, 1990).

Second, building on the indigenous helps to correct a situation in which rural development in Africa becomes a process of alienation for the rural masses. The existing development paradigm treats the developed and developing countries as dichotomies, i.e the former are good and the latter are bad. The developing countries, particularly those of Africa, are treated as if they have neither validity nor integrity. They can be violated by the developed countries at will. Their validity depends on repudiating their present situation in order to be reconstituted into something new and better.

The above implies that development is no longer how a people moves forwards on its own terms but how they may be transformed by others into an image that these other people think they ought to be. Development, therefore, becomes a process of self-alienation and humiliation. The psychological effect of this situation is that the confidence of African leaders has been undermined. They no longer act, they merely react. They accept submissively every development strategy from the industrialized countries and then abandon them as soon as the next one comes along (Ake, 1991; Schulz, 1991, Coulson, 1982).

Third, building on the indigenous helps to avoid the assumption that the indigenous is never conducive for development. It also avoids emphasizing western capitalist rationality too far in the African socio-economic and cultural conditions.

Fourth, it is a necessary condition for self-reliant development to which there is now no alternative. This is because of the fact that dependent development has failed in Africa. This is exemplified by the current deep socio-economic crisis facing all African countries.

What Needs to be Done?

First, there is a great need in Africa to de-emphasize those issues which are monopolizing the attention of our government leaders today i.e the debt crisis, commodity prices, levels of foreign aid, structural adjustment etc. Whereas it is necessary that the unfavourable turn of these factors should be checked, they should not get the highest priority. Ake (1991) rightly states that when these factors were favourable the poverty of the African masses did not improve. Hence, if they are improved today their misery will also not improve.

Second, there is need now to put emphasis where it should have been all long, i.e on the regeneration of the grassroots where there is still some vitality. In order to do this, Africa has to localize its development. Instead of continuing to put emphasis on bigger national projects, priority should go to smaller projects initiated and executed in a participatory manner and relying mainly on local resources. It is only when development is localized and democratically controlled that it will be the right of each and the responsibility of all. It will also cease to be alienating. There are, however, immense obstacles to the operationalization of the concept of building on the indigenous. Most of these obstacles are political. The major resistance comes from African leaders who are determined to maintain their control; and from cynical nations and international agencies who are attending to their self-aggrandizement under the cover of developing Africa.

The overcoming of this resistance will, therefore, be a decisive break-through and must be regarded as a major item on the development agenda in Africa. This has certain implications to development aid agencies: they will have to learn to suspend the belief in the superiority of their knowledge and values; they will have to think in terms of much smaller projects developed and implemented democratically; they will have to make it clear that they are assisting people not governments.

Conclusions

Ecodevelopment is both a rural development policy and strategy which has not attracted the attention it deserves among development scientists because it has a different emphasis. It emphasizes the significance of understanding and appreciating the realities of the African peasant's physical and socio-economic environment.

The past and present rural development strategies in Africa relied too much on authoritarianism and decision-making processes dominated by interests which are often in conflict with public good. This has contributed to the association of development from social needs. Those based on the modernization theory created a situation in which development for the African rural masses became a process of self-alienation and humiliation. They also promoted dependent development which put the African economies into their present economic crisis.

What needs to be done is to put emphasis on the regeneration of the grassroot level. This can only be done if development is localized. It is only when development is localized that it can become the right of each and responsibility for all, and can cease to be alienating. The main problem to this is political resistance from the African leaders who are determined to maintain their control. The overcoming of this resistance should be a decisive breakthrough and should be regarded as a major item on the development agenda.

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