

## **Engaging with the 'Role-modelling Dilemmas' in the development pathways debate in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

The question and idea development has occupied a central place in the postcolonial African discourse, seeking various development paths. The discussion of development has been alive and well in Africa after independence, but the contestation lies on the best way to pursue development. The continent's search for alternative development trajectories has continued in an incomplete cyclical form. There are debates on whether Africa can replicate the Asian miracle developmental state model and other development pathways like the Western model. The current dilemma is that Africa is caught in this continuous mimicry of the 'other.' In responding to the 'Role-modelling Dilemmas' debate in this paper, I seek to argue that Africa has successfully deprived itself by constantly outward-looking and trying to fit in the Western or Eastern economic architecture and development trajectories. However, I underscore that there are lessons that can be tapped from elsewhere for the continent's benefit; hence the role modelling dilemma in Charles Dickens is one of a tale of two cities.

**Keywords:** Role-modelling, Development, Postcolonial Africa

### **Living in the Shadow of the Empire: Post-Independence African Development**

The genesis of the role modelling dilemma is embedded in colonialism, neoliberalism, and imperialism, shaping the current global economic and political architecture. Africa's desperation to evolve economically is conditionally forced to emulate what other countries are doing. Multinational institutions have

advanced development strategies that are not informed by the everyday development challenges in Africa but impose their will (Mahuni et al., 2020). The Western countries' global institutions that are influenced depict Africa as a weaker actor in international development; hence, they continue to impose their hegemonic agenda, making Africa's role in development peripheral (Murithi, 2011).

The desire to emulate the West or Asia is both internal and exogenous in nature, as Africa exists in a geopolitical space where it has no power to influence global development. Postcolonial Africa continues to remain a site of external assistance and paternalism. The Bretton Woods organizations strongly suggested multiple approaches to developing countries, including the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which failed and resulted in incalculable poverty in Africa. The development models advanced by developed countries are not grounded but rather in a projection of Western power (Mahuni et al., 2020, p.2-3). Neo-liberal policies are intimately linked to the financial crisis, economic contraction, rising debt, loss of social services, extreme inequality, and decline in terms of trade (Cheru, 2008, p.30). After independence in the quest for development, Africa followed the western neoliberal development path supported and implemented through the Bretton Woods institutional framework of ESAP. As a result, Africa is trapped in a role modelling dilemma in which the continent executes development agendas others set; the most prominent example is the ESAP.

The long search for a purely African model is not a simple one but a protracted process as the empire seeks to confine Africa in its shadow and as part of its sphere of influence. Africa occupies a peripheral position in global economic and political architecture. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012a, p.81), the current world order does not amuse or condone radical thinking that differs from Euro-American neoliberal thought. Such

radicalism is easily dismissed as sentimental, nostalgic, anti-systematic, and, in the worst-case scenario, terroristic. This exemplifies the determination of the current geopolitical structure to confine Africa to a peripheral position and set itself as the living example that Africa should emulate to develop; any idea of divergence is not tolerated. Africa is caught in a role model mimicking syndrome that keeps the continent always searching for development.

Role model dilemmas are impossible due to social, economic, and political historical differences. For example, Moss (2011, p. 33) stated that one of the significant legacies of colonialism is the prevalence of weak political states that are highly vulnerable and prone to violent conflicts. Africa has also inherited fragile colonial borders established based on colonial rule. The author used the cases of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Somalia as examples. Political unity is forced or coerced and has weak political institutions. In contrast to the Asian Tigers, which have excellent political systems, institutions, and social foundations and are progressing on a single path with few conflicts as contrasted to Africa, colonialism created a subservient weak state.

In contrast to the Asian Tigers, where the state had total control over society, economy, and industrial policy, the postcolonial African economy is still colonially connected to Western configurations, making applying the developmental state virtually impossible. Is it conceivable for African governments to continue unitary authoritarian approaches like the Asians did when the developmental conditions blossomed with the emergence of Western liberal democracy post-1990? This question remains whether the Asian Miracle can be replicated in Africa.

## **Development as Mimicry of the "Other": The Strenuous Search for a Path to Development**

The protracted search for a rightful pathway to development has preoccupied African states since the dawn of independence. The arduous pursuit of development for the sake of development led to a conundrum for "new" African states, who are thus trapped in an unfinished loop of copying the 'other' like the East Asian Developmental States model without considering the varied cultural, economic, and geopolitical distinctions. Thus, according to scholars like Routley (2014, p. 5), the geopolitical climate and increasing globalization doubt the prospect of new developing states emerging in Africa and Asia because such development is not permitted under the current global political and economic order. Furthermore, Routley (2014), the Asian Tigers were strategically positioned in geopolitics and had a good relationship with the United States of America, fighting the communist Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. For instance, the rise of the Asian Tigers occurred before the World Trade Organization's free trade policy, allowing them to safeguard key and emerging industries from unfair competition, which is inconceivable today.

In agreement with Routley (2014), Onuoha (2008, p. 21) contends that given the apparent incompatibility and poles apart, the developmentalism ideal in the continent cannot be equated with the Asian experiences. The conditions in Africa at the time and those in Asia during the 1960s, when the Developmental States model was flourishing, are very dissimilar. The operationalization of the East Asian development model is challenging as African states have been continuously deindustrializing since their independence, which has diminished their developmental objectives. However, these issues should not debar African nations from tapping other regions' experiences in their circumstances.

The dilemma of role modelling arises from the desire to imitate rather than learn from "others' experiences" in the development paths of African governments. Using the analogy of universities, Sarr (2019, p. 89) posited that North American Universities inspired Asian Universities. Thus, Asia constructed their models of universities that are targeted at solving specific developmental needs. In this context, the Asian Tigers should only serve to inspire Africa to learn from their experiences rather than imitate the ideal. Pankaj Mishra (1999), cited in Sarr (2019, p. 92), explores the foundations of Global South societies' desire to emulate the West, which the author attributes to a systematic attempt to embrace North Atlantic societal, economic, cultural, and political forms while sacrificing their societies' cultural wealth and singularities.

Deng (1998, p. 142) notes that to dispel the role model affliction that has engulfed postcolonial Africa, Africa should reflect on its history to understand itself and others rather than imitate development models inspired by different histories, which lack legitimacy. Africa should look at its history, which the author describes as full of glory and humiliation. Should Africa continue this path in the contemporary world? All Asian Tigers were authoritarian, with the state having complete control over all aspects of policymaking (Meyns, 2010). Africa needs state policy autonomy to prosper. Asian states used autocratic tendencies to limit civil freedoms to achieve stability, but is this practical in modern-day Africa? (Burger, 2014). Hence role modelling development path is not sustainable, as Africa should chart its course. The experience of Asia demonstrates that different development routes are more common. African nations should identify and follow their economic growth routes based on their unique circumstances and surroundings, including the significant colonial heritage (Oqubay, 2020. p,2)

The role modelling dilemma is a living reality in Africa as the continent is confronted with numerous challenges which makes foreign project impossible. Fronted the Four Theorems, Collier

(2007) asserted that Africa has four obstacles: conflict, poor governance, Dutch disease, and landlocked status. Many African countries have these constraints, but they were not a hindrance in Asia when the Asian Tigers rose to prominence and overcame them. For instance, it would be impossible to replicate the European development model as it was based on colonialism, slavery, cheap labour, and accumulation by dispossession, all of which are impractical in current society. Additionally, owing to the Marshall plan, which provided Europe with affordable loans for post-war reconstruction, they could do it much more quickly.

### **Asian Miracle: Lessons for Africa**

de Haan, P. (2020. p,22), in attempting to explain the roots of Asia's development, proposed that "understanding how Asian countries develop so rapidly may be of service to Africa to avoid it from missing the boat.". This analysis has a flaw since it assumes that Africa cannot build its developmental strategy and must adopt that of others.

Africa's development depends on its ability to create a strong, democratic, and activist state that would express its role in internal development. The lessons learned from Asia highlight the significance of national policies that promote strategic industries, build domestic infrastructure, invest in human resources, and regulate financial markets (Cheru, 2009, p.37). One lesson from the Asian development experience is that African governments should be aware that industrial policies and the state's developmental role are crucial for long-term growth and profound structural change (Oqubay, 2020. p,2). African nations require policy latitude to implement institutional reforms that differ from the World Trade Organization's, the International Monetary Fund's, and the World Bank's conventional dogmas (Cheru, 2009, p.278).

Africa can learn from the Asian experiences, which have established effective bureaucracy, institutional capacity, and

meritocracy-managed institutions. Gumede (2011, p. 3) opined that for the state to set national goals, use the market, and implement policies through a bureaucracy with broad public and political legitimacy, it must possess administrative, technical, and political competence and competency. In addition, Taylor (2005) comments that this is mainly attributable to the state's ability, liberal democracy, and committed governance with a national vision that comes before their interests in his study of Botswana, a successful example of a developmental state. The developmental state may offer an option, but these conditions must prevail first. Rwanda is one of the few African nations that has so far come close to replicating what Asia did in terms of institutional creation and development, thanks to the political commitment of the executive to these goals (Mann & Berry, 2015). An East Asian-style progressive developmental state has a competent and professional civil service to succeed; however, African governments do not have the same human capital capacities as the Asian States.

For Africa to successfully utilize human and natural resources, there is a greater need for the state to spearhead the formulation and implementation of policies that ensure maximum resource utilization efficiently (Gumede, 2011, p.3). The author suggests that policies should be implemented to enhance institutions to prevent manipulation by political elites and the private sector. The Asian model can be applicable in Africa as Taylor (2005) concedes that Botswana's developmental state is premised on a zero-corruption stance and a professional bureaucracy capable of enforcing laws. A state's prospects for success are dependent on its resources, both human and natural. In the case of Ethiopia, the Economic Development of the country was alongside the progress made by the developmental state in Ethiopia by the then political regime in the country.

Another Cheru (2008, p.29) bemoans what he characterizes as unfair trading practices of the developed countries, which

have stifled African countries from entering the expert market on an equal basis. The inability of African countries to process natural resources locally adds to the continents' challenges. Hence, for African development to mirror the Asian Tigers, the African Lions need to value add their resources before exporting as the Asians did.

### **Countering the Role Modelling Dilemma: Configuring a Pan African Informed Approach**

Escaping from the role model puzzle is a difficult task that requires total dedication. Africa's intellectual independence and sovereignty are necessary for the process. For the role model dilemma to be cleared up, according to Sarr (2019, p. 1), Africa must abandon the common buzzwords of development, the Millennium Development Goals for Sustainable Development, and the Objectives of Durable Development, which up until this point have only served to project Western myths onto the development of African societies. Since these concepts have failed to yield any significant development as Africa just adopted them but forgot to give them meaning. These concepts have relied too much on a Western cosmology that conditions their reading of the rea (Sarr, 2019). There is a need to remake and reimagine the continent outside the projection of the West; thus, the experiences of the developing Asian Tigers will be yet another wild goose chase with very little chance of success.

Nyerere (1969, p. 33) "stated that Africa should draw lessons from the perseverance and bravery of the Chinese revolution. This is because Africa is not an island unto itself; rather, it exists in a wealth of nations. He said that when developing and implementing policies to suit the demands of various nations, African governments should use intelligence. By promoting this, Nyerere argues that no one solution can always be used in all situations and that each nation should approach problems based on local reality. Therefore, distinct economic, social, and political systems will be used by various nations



worldwide. Only by doing this can each achieve the shared goal of improving and advancing humankind. In support of Nyerere (1969), Deng (1998, p. 143) notes that Africans must drive Africa towards destiny by solving the continent's development challenges. Nyerere is against the idea of role-modelling but rather local solutions to local problems. According to Deng (1998, p. 144), Africa's key concern should be finding an African model of sustainable development that will restore human dignity and allow for progress. He supports what he called the "Africanization" of economic and knowledge-creation concepts. Therefore, role modelling is not a long-term strategy for the development of Africa since the solutions lie in local innovation.

The main preoccupation for Africa should be to seek an African framework of development that would seek an equitable holistic development path that respects and restore human dignity. At the centre of the struggle for decolonisation should be the struggle for supplanting and undoing the Western imperial designs that have claimed hegemony on all facets of life, restoring and reinventing the lost African cosmologies of knowledge. Africanize economies to create just and transformative just postcolonial futures. This is only possible if Africa is allowed to speak with authority to set the agenda for its development. Africa needs policy autonomy and freedom to reimagine and implement local development frameworks and counteract the effects of the globalism espoused by organisations like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank (Cheru, 2009, p.278).

## **Conclusion**

Africa can benefit from the lessons and experiences of other regions without the need to enter the copy-paste arrangement. Much time is being most with the need to copy what is happening elsewhere with little inward-looking, guided by local realities. The challenge befalling the role model dilemma is the

pitfall of thinking the solution lies from the outside. I believe in Africa's ability to develop its model informed by the continent's challenges. The answers are not East or West but inside the continent and looking everywhere.

The role modelling dilemma in Africa remains a tale of two cities with both light and darkness where lessons can be learnt besides its challenges. As Fanon (1961. p,314) stated, *"If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us, but if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent, and we must make discoveries."* In agreement with Fanon's call, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, (2018, p.30) echoes similar sentiments when he posits that *"....today, many Africans are toying with the notion of 'developmental states in an attempt to follow the developmental path of the Asian Tigers. However, the global colonial and imperial matrices of power are not enabling them compared to the time of the rise of Asian Tigers...."*. Therefore, role-modelling approaches to development continue to be a problem, an enigma, and a euphoric endeavour by Africa to progress, but sustainable solutions must be rooted in Africa's socio-cultural, economic, and political landscape. Consequently, the only answer to local issues continues to be local ones, initiatives like Regional Integration, including initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area, Economic Community of West African States, and East African Community to increase fair trade among states.

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