

Is NEPAD an effective development organisation?

Written by Joseph Morbi

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JOSEPH MORBI, OCT 26 2011

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), set up in 2001 as an integral part of the African Union, has been the subject of much scrutiny since its conception particularly perhaps because it is sometimes viewed as "one last hope for Africa to reverse its slide into irrelevance." [1] In the forty years previous to the adoption of NEPAD and the AU the major development strategy body had been the Organisation of African Unity, which aimed at eradicating colonialism on the continent in all its forms and attempted to remain neutral in global affairs in order to prevent outside influence from dominating African politics, particularly in the context of the Cold War. [2] Largely however, the OAU was ineffective at planning and implementing a development strategy for Africa, perhaps due to internal fractures between different African nations. NEPAD is the latest attempt to create an effective development strategy for the continent as a whole and has faced both praise and criticism for its efforts during the last ten years. In this essay I will examine the areas in which NEPAD has been both praised and criticised whilst also inspecting its successes and failures, by which I mean to show that despite not being perfect NEPAD has the capacity to provoke real change on the continent.

Kempe Ronald Hope Sr.'s argument that NEPAD "constitutes the most important advance in African development policy during the last four decades" is strong because it represents a real attempt by multiple African nations to work together in creating an effective development programme promoting "peace and stability, democracy, sound economic development, [and] people-centric development". [3] It has also helped cement ideas of the link between good governance and sustainable development, the two processes becoming inseparable as Zack-Williams notes: "no democracy, no development". [4] In the four decades previous to the adoption of NEPAD development strategy and policy had been the domain of the Organisation of African Unity, created in 1963 to improve the situation of all Africans, aiming to eradicate poverty and raise living standards for all. The Organisation of African Unity was an important step in shaping thinking about African development policy, and could be seen as the first real link between democracy and development as it pursued the end of colonialism on the continent in all its forms. [5] Ultimately however it failed in its goals due to a number of reasons including "non-interference in a member's internal affairs...differences over the major political issues confronting Africa, and the ideological divide between the so-called Casablanca and Monrovia groups over the pace and objectives of regional cooperation." [6] The formation of the African Union and the adoption of NEPAD was at least in part a continuation of principles set out by the OAU, and therefore to a certain extent the New Partnership for Africa's Development is certainly not radically new, although that does not necessarily contradict Hope's belief that NEPAD is the "most important advance in African development policy" if it can help to provide a more effective implementation of those principles. De Waal argues that this is actually one of NEPAD's main strengths, writing that "Africa doesn't need grand new paradigms; what it needs is a proper application of lessons learned, and a replication and broader application of existing best practices." [7]

To some advocates of NEPAD, the New Partnership is also at the forefront of the idea of an African Renaissance, which originated largely with the end of apartheid in South Africa and particularly perhaps with Thabo Mbeki's appointment as President in 1996 with his 'I am an African Speech', in which he evokes a shared African identity with a shared suffering and a desire to end it by reaffirming Africa's "rise from the ashes". [8] The idea of the African Renaissance became associated with five "areas of engagement: the encouragement of cultural exchange; the 'emancipation of African woman from patriarchy'; the mobilization of youth; the broadening, deepening and sustenance of democracy; and the initiation of sustainable economic development". [9] These areas of engagement are certainly evident in the framework of NEPAD as it owes its roots to the Millennium Africa Renaissance Programme

Is NEPAD an effective development organisation?

Written by Joseph Morbi

(MAP) proposed by Thabo Mbeki to the World Economic Forum in 2001, providing a 'first draft' of what would become the 'New Partnership for Africa's Development'.^[10] The basis of the New Partnership for Africa's Development is strong as it draws on existing principles and practices with the aim of improving their effectiveness, examples of which I shall now examine.

During its first ten years of existence NEPAD has had some very significant successes, possibly most notably the adoption of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which is designed to "candidly assess the country's biggest problems, identify needed actions and secure commitments from the country under review for fixing those problems."^[11] The APRM identifies the biggest issues and possible solutions and categorises them into four focus areas: Democracy and Good Political Governance; Economic Governance and Management; Corporate Governance; and Socio-Economic Development.^[12] Ghana was one of the first countries to sign up to the APRM in 2003 and its first review was completed in 2005, devising a National Programme of Action (NPOA) to act on the recommendations made by the APRM which is monitored and itself reviewed annually. The 2007 Annual Progress Report makes note of several achievements in all sectors, including the ratification of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women; a reform of the Ghanaian tax administration; a reduction of both the corporate and the withholding taxes which has allowed the improvement in the operational incomes of companies; and improvement in access to key social services such as education and health services.^[13] Ghana is a particularly good example as it has recently submitted an application for its second review; however it is not the only country that has benefited from the APRM. Following Kenya's first review the country has made significant progress, perhaps most importantly in its response to inter- and intra-state conflicts and the promotion of civil and human rights, with the intention of improving democracy and good governance.^[14] The Progress Reports for both Ghana and Kenya provide evidence that the APRM can help improve the infrastructure of a country and "accelerate their progress towards adopting and implementing the priorities and programmes of the New Partnership for Africa's Development".^[15]

Another area that appears to have achieved some significant success is the NEPAD e-Schools Initiative, an initiative that aims to "impart ICT skills to young Africans in primary and secondary schools as well as harness ICT technology to improve, enrich and expand education in African countries", allowing them to "participate effectively in the global information society" as part of the wider e-Africa Programme.^[16] A research study carried out in Kenya between both NEPAD and non-NEPAD schools found that the non-NEPAD schools, despite having more fully qualified staff (83% had either a diploma or degree in computer studies), had significantly less integration of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in other studies whilst the NEPAD schools had access to increased ICT facilities such as smart boards and therefore experienced significantly higher integration of technology.^[17] As a result of increased availability of technology, students in NEPAD schools were able to use educational materials; gain access to the internet; and make use of electronic libraries, resulting in higher academic performance, as the results showed that "61% of all the students indicated that information search contributed positively to their academic improvement... 90% [of whom] were NEPAD school students."^[18] In response to criticisms that NEPAD has provided few real results thus far, UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Africa Cheick Sidi Diarra replied that "NEPAD has made great progress since its adoption. It's not visible for the time being."^[19] Since NEPAD's goals are both medium and long term, it seems harsh to criticise any lack of radical change as the effects of NEPAD's actions may not be felt for years to come, but there are already signs that it is making a real and effective difference.

There are however those who criticise NEPAD on various levels, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) often leading with their criticisms, particularly pointing to the lack of consultation with civil society and the structure of NEPAD itself which is described as being 'top-down' and elite-driven.^[20] The initial draft of NEPAD was presented to the members of the G8 before it was seen by any sector of African civil society, and Greenpeace notes that this exclusion of civil society "severely diminishes the legitimacy" of the programme, a criticism that has been taken up by many other groups.^[21] This "blatant disregard for the views of the African people in the design of NEPAD" has been widely denigrated and there have been calls for much more participation in all sectors to increase its efficiency and ensure that the concerns of local groups are not ignored in the quest for development.^[22] The 'New Partnership' is seen as being driven by elites in society rather than local social movements, which although might be more effective for creating a large scale development plan for Africa, could result in local communities not being able to benefit from the scheme. NEPAD has also been criticised for being

Is NEPAD an effective development organisation?

Written by Joseph Morbi

based on neo-liberal ideals rather than the genuine concerns of the African continent, following the principles and practices of the Washington Consensus which has “damaged Africa over the last several decades”, leading to a “sense of betrayal” amongst the civil society organisations.[23] It has been argued that the use of the “old neo-liberal models of development” could allow poorer countries to continue suffering economic exploitation by larger economies in the name of regional development.[24]

On a more perhaps practical side there have been criticisms about how the initial NEPAD document and subsequent documents have been written. One example of this is that despite promoting poverty eradication as a core value, “there is very little guidance in either the NEPAD base document or associated documents on the direction for dealing with the crisis”, indicating that poverty reduction is in actuality a secondary objective behind regional development.[25] This quest to solve Africa’s problems of underdevelopment risk the possibility of ignoring various social issues that might arise from rapid development strategies, particularly with a large emphasis being on urban areas which could lead to forced migration from village communities into cities, which itself could potentially increase poverty in the region. This seeming lack of detail on how to tackle certain social issues leads to the apparent omission of one of Africa’s largest health concerns: HIV/AIDS, which is mentioned just once in the initial documents with no plan of action for region-wide containment or treatment.[26] De Waal notes that the “HIV/AIDS pandemic is the number one survival threat both to Africans as individuals and to African countries”, and yet NEPAD has accorded it no greater status than a health issue, an approach that seems to ignore the serious implications that it could have if not monitored.[27] It is possible that increased social and economic inequality caused by the creation of jobs and opportunities could aggravate the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as studies have shown that in areas with such inequality “those with money often have more sexual partners and this makes them vulnerable to HIV infection”. [28] It is clear that NEPAD certainly needs some refining, particularly in detailing how to combat certain issues; however it also needs to develop a more complete view of Africa’s development problems and perhaps in particular examine more closely the implications of health issues such as HIV/AIDS.

Perhaps one of the biggest failures of NEPAD to date is the issue that despite publicly promoting the ideals of good governance and democracy, it “fails to take them sufficiently seriously such that obvious violations—e.g., of recent elections in Congo-Brazzaville, Madagascar, Zambia and Zimbabwe—are publicly criticised and punished.”[29] This seeming failure to address one of the core principles that NEPAD was supposedly built on could stem from the lack of consultation in its conception, as in no African country was a referendum undertaken to gauge public acceptance, and this lack of consultation has led some to view NEPAD’s commitment to democracy as suspicious.[30] It could also be argued that by tying itself to democracy NEPAD could in fact limit its chances of success rather than facilitate better economic development or even provide good governance. Patrick Chabal notes that democracy in the West has been an outcome of economic development rather than a precondition for it, and makes the point that in the democratisations of the recent past in East Asia “it is an authoritarian, but (and this is crucial) effective state that has driven economic growth with single-minded determination, in the process forcing local businessmen to invest in their own country.”[31] Perhaps therefore instead of concerning itself with Western ideals of Democratisation and Liberal forms of governance, NEPAD should dis-associate itself from politics entirely in order to function as an effective development programme. Part of the debate must concern itself with whether Africa should be allowed to follow similar paths to those taken throughout history, eventually arriving at liberal democracy as a last stage or whether it should be steered in a particular direction by the West, using liberal democracy as a flagship for their policies concerning the continent.

There have also been criticisms of the various policies chosen by NEPAD, for example various social and economic measures that the programme has undertaken have in the past contributed to the marginalisation of women, despite NEPAD’s promotion of social and gender equity.[32] Even in terms of development policy itself, whilst openly recommending “market access for African products to world markets” NEPAD also recommends African leaders to “secure and stabilise what it calls ‘preferential treatment by key developed country partners [in particular Western European nations].”[33] The African Peer Review Mechanism, seen as the key to providing an open view of the internal workings of African countries has also been criticised, not for failing to provide such a view but rather proving unable to effect any significant change. As the main example of this Kenya completed its first peer review in 2006 in which a number of challenges were presented, including issues of “past crimes, corruption, marginalization and poverty”, which the review noted needed to be addressed before reconciliation could be achieved.[34] However

Is NEPAD an effective development organisation?

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subsequently there was seemingly a lack of political will by the government in implementing certain changes to the existing system despite action in other areas, the violence in 2008 showing a lack of progress in tackling the issues raised, as the review warned that future violence was indeed possible were the issues raised not addressed.[35] NEPAD is undoubtedly faced with many challenges due to the very nature of the problem it is trying to address, and it seems inevitable that it will not be able to overcome all obstacles it faces at the first attempt, and thus it will experience some failures both temporary and perhaps absolute.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development represents the possibility of real change in Africa, particularly with its ties to democracy and good governance, and it has certainly proved that it does have the capacity to function more effectively than the Organisation for African Unity which failed to make much of a difference to the conditions suffered by the African people. NEPAD has had periods of both optimism and pessimism, and some of its ideals have been contradicted by the policies it has followed, however it is important to remember that the programme is still relatively young and has the opportunity to be refined in the future. NEPAD does not represent anything radically new, instead offering refinement of existing policies, and this has been used as an argument both for and against its effectiveness. However I believe that this is strength rather than a weakness, as to expect a 'miracle cure' for Africa's underdevelopment problems seems rather unreasonable, and what is really needed is the "proper application of lessons learned" and the use of the best existing practices.[36] I also believe that the successes it has enjoyed outweigh its failings as any programme must encounter failure in order for it to eventually succeed. I would argue that NEPAD does constitute "the most important advance in African development policy during the last four decades" and may yet "reverse [Africa's] slide into irrelevance", as it has built on existing principles with the aim of improving them and has already implemented several promising initiatives that may be further improved as part of the long term development strategy.[37]

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Is NEPAD an effective development organisation?

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Is NEPAD an effective development organisation?

Written by Joseph Morbi

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