To What Extent does NEPAD and Other Recent Initiatives Promise an 'African Renaissance'?

The idea of an 'African Renaissance' has been very popular in recent years because it is seen as a break from the problems and negativity of the past. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is promoted by its creators as part of this ideal; an African solution to the numerous problems facing the continent. Since its launch in 2001, NEPAD has been heavily criticised on many grounds. A major theme is the absense of women and women's issues from the project.

I will argue that inclusion of women is extremely important in development initiatives for Africa because of their massive contribution to the economies and societies of many countries. Thus, for there to be an 'African Renaissance' (a new start based on democracy, 'good governance' and prosperity) women must be included, the reasons for their marginalisation must be addressed, and they must receive significant benefits from the scheme.

I will focus only on NEPAD from the new initiatives associated with a 'renaissance'. I will show that NEPAD fails to address gender issues at all and is merely a continuation of patriarchy despite its initial promises. Its full acceptance of neo-liberal economics suggests that NEPAD will have a detrimental affect on the future of African women.

The Importance of Women's Involvement

A new start or 'renaissance' for Africa must include women. As well as making up a large proportion of the population of the continent, African women bear the majority of the responsibility for dealing with many of the social problems that NEPAD aims to address. Furthermore, women account for a disproportionate number of Africa's poor, and are politically marginalised. In this section I will examine, firstly, women's social and developmental contributions, and secondly, women's subordinate status in society, as particular reasons for the inclusion of women in any development project like NEPAD.

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The role of women in African society is increasingly recognised within the development discourse. It is estimated that women are responsible for approximately 80% of all food production and processing, as well as 80% of fuel and water provision. Internal trade is also a majority female role (Chazan et al, 1999: 93). As well as productive work, women are responsible for the vast majority of reproductive work; raising children, caring for the sick, and various other essential community roles (Manuh, 1998).

Across the continent, women perform the vast majority of work connected to small-scale food production and marketing (Manuh, 1998). This includes the organisation of large, disciplined, internal trade networks (Chazan et al, 1999: 90). As such, women are highly significant economic actors but are commonly overlooked by macro-economic strategies that focus on international trade and investment.

Famine and AIDS are two of the key issues for African development (Nyamu, 2003) and both are closely related to women's role within society. Manuh argues that increased development attention for women is essential if food security is to be achieved in parts of the continent. She uses World Bank data on Kenya to predict that, if women were given the same opportunities as men, food production in Africa as a whole could increase by 10 -15 percent (1998). Similarly, women's principal role in caring for the sick, as well as their slightly higher risk of contracting HIV, makes them a primary target for health-based development initiatives.

Quality of life in many areas of Africa is restricted by the serious environmental problems of desertification and deforestation. Again, women are at the forefront of the campaign for change and sustainability due to their roles as providers of fuel, water and food which brings them into daily contact with these problems (Manuh, 1998). Wangari Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her lead role in organising women in Kenya and all across the continent to plant thirty million trees. The trees help prevent soil erosion and provide a sustainable source of fuel (BBC, 2004).

NEPAD identifies conflict is another major hinderance to overall African development, because it encourages 'afro-pessimism' and an unwillingness to invest. Women's role in conflict resolution is also therefore important to the objectives of NEPAD. Women have shown great success in conflict resolution; their involvement in peace negotiations, and small scale initiatives such as peace education, community peace building and buy-back schemes for weapons, could gain increased influence with more support.

Despite women being responsible for the provision of the large majority of everyday necessities, the level of female suboridination across the continent is high. Longwe describes African societies as 'extremely patriarchal' with men

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generally in control of resources and decision making and women responsible for most of the work (2002). This division of labour is partially a result of the colonial era where strict 'Victorian' gender roles or similar ideas about women's role in the home were layed onto colonised societies. Men were seen as the appropriate workers for export production and other wage earning jobs which left women solely responsible for most of the home based and subsistence labour (Chazan et al, 1999: 92). Although by no means equal before colonialism, gender disparity increased under European rule (Manuh, 1998; Haynes, 1996: 166).

Women's subordination is often seen as merely a social problem but in many countries it is also entrenched in law. Longwe selects Zambia as just one example of a country which purports to give women full equality but which makes important exceptions. Zambian women remain legally inferior in matters of personal law, marriage law and customary law; the areas in which discrimination is most likely (2002). The institutionalisation of gender-based discrimination is a common feature of patriarchy worldwide.

The last thirty years have seen further decline in the conditions of women as a social group in large parts of Africa. The so-called 'feminisation of poverty' is a symptom of this decline with women making up an increasing percentage of the poor (UN, 2000). Neo-liberal economic policy is often blamed for this; traditional economic assessments tend to overlook women's largely unpaid contributions to the economy and therefore fail to take their needs into account. The welfare cutbacks that were a feature of Structural Adjustment Programs impacted particularly heavily on women. Where healthcare or food subsidies were cut it was primarily women who had to find ways to feed and care for their families, often at the price of a vastly increased workload (Manuh, 1998). The HIV crisis adds huge pressure to this situation.

Women are of vital importance in society throughout the continent yet are the victims of widespread and serious structural discrimination (Longwe, 2002a: 32; Ahmed, 2003). This dual relationship to society marks women out as a particularly important group in both planning and benefiting from development projects. NEPAD, in its aims to bring about an 'African Renaissance', should take women very seriously into account.

Gender-blindness in NEPAD and its Consequences

Initially, NEPAD seems to be gender-aware; the promotion of women in political participation and social and economic development is a principal objective of the plan (NEPAD, 2001: 10). However, analysis of the document leads Longwe and others to conclude that the authors 'seem to be genuinely, deeply and comprehensively ignorant of all matters relating to gender and development.'(Longwe, 2002a: 29).

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The recognition of women's roles in various issues are severely limited; an example is its failure to mention small or medium-scale economic ventures which are dominated by women. Instead, the plan focuses on large-scale economics and international trade which results in women being ignored as economic actors (Wanyeki, 2005). Similarly, by overlooking women's role as the primary providers of food, NEPAD fails to address serious problems facing women(in particular single women and female-headed households) in acquiring land rights and in receiving the profits from their work (Wanyeki, 2005). The damaging effects of neo-liberal economics for women mentioned earlier are also ignored by NEPAD which fully accepts the neo-liberal agenda (Wanyeki, 2005; Tadesse, 2002: 4).

The document promotes an idea of women's situation which completely ignores the structural violence and social and cultural discrimination many face. The document's answer to gender discrimination is:

Promoting the role of women in social and economic development by reinforcing their capacity in the domains of education and training; by developing revenue-generating activities through facilitating access to credit; and by assuring their participation in the political and economic life of African countries. (NEPAD, 2001: 10, para 49)

As well as being a remarkably short list of solutions (possibly due to the neglect of gender analysis in identifying problems), this locates the blame for women's subordination with women themselves. NEPAD advocates that women are trained to participate, helped with acquiring access to money, and encouraged into public life (Wanyeki, 2005; Longwe, 2002a: 5). This attitude towards gender issues is influenced by economic efficiency models which have depoliticised the issue and therefore focused only on women's access to resources (Afonja, 2005).

Where gendered issues are recognised, they are inconsistently followed up if not dropped altogether (Longwe, 2002). The initial aim quoted above translates merely to a goal to promote female enrolment in primary and secondary schools (NEPAD, 2001: 14). This secondary goal is then entirely absent from the specific 'objectives' and 'actions' identified in the section on education and therefore written out of the document altogether (NEPAD, 2001: 29). The Millenium Development Goals related to gender are included in the early part of the document but similarly are not followed through. Tadesse argues that these goals for 2015 are unachievable in the majority of African countries and therefore are an irrelevant inclusion in the plan (2002: 5).

The gender-blindness of NEPAD can be explained by entrenched patriarchal culture across Africa and the almost complete absence of women from the bodies that created and promote NEPAD, including many state governments (Longwe, 2002). This is despite plenty of potential female leadership and female interest in the politics of NEPAD (Manuh, 1998).

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The absence of gendered analysis, targets, or indicators leaves NEPAD unable to promise an 'African Renaissance' for women (Wanyeki, 2005). This leads Longwe to predict 'a continuation of the previous miserable record' rather than a turning point (2002). Many analyses predicts a continuing increase in gender inequality as a result of NEPAD. Not only does the plan not address existing problems, it reinforces Africa's acceptance of the neo-liberal agenda which has generally proved to be detrimental to women since its introduction (Randriamaro, **????;** Pheko, 2002; Tadesse, 2002: 7). In addition, the absence of a gendered perspective in NEPAD may undermine the plan's ultimate goals. Good governance, meaningful democracy and sustainable economic growth are all dependent on women's inclusion in the system (Longwe, 2002; Tadesse, 2002: 3)

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown the the importance of including African women in development projects. Women are responsible for the majority of work related to the important development areas of food security, provision of water and fuel, environmental protection and small scale trade. They can **also** play an influential role in conflict resolution. Women are frequent victims of development projects; women's labour typically fills the gaps where healthcare, food subsidies and other welfare services are cut. Furthermore, women are at a structural disadvantage to greater or lesser extent in all African countries, where they are under-represented legally, politically and economically. Women are therefore both a great resource and a target for development projects such as NEPAD. For an African renaissance to occur, it would clearly have to involve women.

I then demonstrated the extent to which NEPAD is gender-blind despite its commitment to furthering the emancipation of women. Issues that are problematic for women are almost completely ignored in the analysis; structural impediments to gender equality are also overlooked entirely; and the commitments made early in the document are not followed through to any gender-based outcomes. As a result, NEPAD is very unlikely to improve women's positions in society and may further add to women's problems through a continuation of neo-liberal economic policies.

I have shown that NEPAD as it stands cannot promise a 'renaissance' for Africa's women. For a true renaissance to begin, women need to be intimately involved.

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