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Amarildo Barbosa

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Modern Colonialism in African Education: The Wave of Foreign Investment in Sub-Saharan Africa

Amarildo Barbosa

Many African scholars feel that there is a need for a re-focusing of goals and purpose among universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Because of the low retention rate of graduates, who continue to emigrate and work outside of Africa, scholars often view African higher education as a loss of investment. A current educational objective in Sub-Saharan Africa is creating a new generation of African universities that are focused on community development projects and programs aimed at aiding problems related to civil works. With significant financial assistance from foreign investors, however, African universities must be wary of the control external parties will have over internal matters. As a continent long enduring the effects of colonialism, Africa and its educational leaders must be intentional about ensuring that the primary beneficiaries of this developmental process are the African countries affected and those who study, work, and live there.

How is Africa factored into the globalizing world economy? Commerce and education play significant roles as nations on every continent become contributors to the global economy. This has created an interdependence of industries. A consequence of that interdependence is the domino effect felt when a particular industry in one nation collapses. For instance, the struggles of the oil industry, stemming from one region of the world, had dramatic effects on various continents, as evidenced by the fluctuations of gas prices in the United States and elsewhere. As the world economy continues the trend of globalization, revolving around trade, importation, and exportation of goods to and from various countries, new markets will emerge and display the potential of a promising future. Investors are seemingly always on alert about the next emerging market. The potential in the realm of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as such a market. International institutions and governments are looking to benefit from this untapped resource by investing in and developing institutions of higher education of Sub-Saharan Africa with hope that these countries will evolve in commerce and provide returns on initial investment.

Amarildo Barbosa is a first-year graduate student in the HESA program. He received his bachelor's degree in Marketing from the University of Vermont in 2006. He is currently a member of the Residential Life department at UVM. His interests mainly revolve around African higher education and university athletics.

Fostering Economic Growth through Higher Education in Africa

Africa was seen as a hotbed of resources and a place of untapped potential when European explorers arrived. In many ways, the world continues to view the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa through an investor's lens. There is more than one side to this matter. Whether or not Africa is at a point where it can serve as a major contributor to the global economy is debatable. Several steps must first be taken in order for Sub-Saharan Africa to initiate and exhibit the benefits of growth. Development is essential to this process. In the context of developing nations, James E. Mauch (2000) defined development as the "process of improving the social, economic, and political viability of the State and its citizens as well as general improvement in the quality of life" (p. 26). The kind of trends said to be characteristic of ongoing progressive development include: a growing educational system, a stable workforce of educated and "educable" (p. 26) workers, low employment costs, an increasing per capita Gross National Product (GNP), and growing sophistication and diversity of goods, services, and "industrialized products" (p. 25). These trends are further enhanced with strengthened infrastructure, a relatively accessible economy with access to capital markets, a regulated and reliable banking system, political stability, and economic growth as a direct result of market success (Mauch). The argument is that these changes can be realized through a bolstered system of higher education.

Jee Peng Tan (2006), in the foreword of the report entitled "Higher Education: Economic Development in Africa," argued that higher education has the potential to boost national productivity, competitiveness, and economic growth in the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa. While stimulating such growth and productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa would be a good thing, there are opportunity costs associated with any investment. What is the tradeoff in this context? As mentioned earlier in this article, the notion of foreign investment in African higher education has other implications as well. What also accompanies the investment is a degree of influence in the decision-making processes of the governments and institutions of higher education themselves. Along with the financial support, universities would have to then align their academic objectives with the findings of research by international organizations like the World Bank. For example, if the World Bank commissioned a task force that generated a report stating that universities should focus on agricultural engineering, the universities would likely need to comply in order to receive support. With the goal of boosting economies to provide optimal performance and greater returns, education becomes secondary and the freedom of decision-making is stifled.

Historical Perspective: University and Social Development

Within the African diaspora, there are people who believe that African universi-

ties need to shift their focus from liberal arts and humanities and focus their efforts on courses of study that will not only give students a great deal of practical knowledge but that will also stimulate development in the communities surrounding that particular institution. Calestous Juma, of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is one such individual who finds it necessary for higher education and social development to merge within the African states. Juma is the lead author of "Innovation: Applying Knowledge in Development," a document generated in response to the Task Force on Science, Technology, and Innovation of the Millennium Project, designed for African nations, which was commissioned by United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan (Dickson, 2005). In considering how these practices will benefit the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to note that such practices have been utilized in the past by other nations, one of which is the United States of America in its early stages of development. Focusing university missions in the direction of civic works projects and social development will work in a society that has not yet reached its full industrial capacity.

The role of higher education in relation to societal development is a pre-existing practice and one that was implemented in the oldest institutions of the United States. At the moment, such a strategy is being viewed as a 21st century solution to problems in countries often referred to as "Third World." However, this is not the case. From historical examples, one may conclude that higher education is one of the critical factors in allowing a developing society to create and maintain a stable economy. Juma's claim was that the institution of higher education should be one that serves social needs (Dickson, 2005). Harvard in the mid 17th century, according to Mauch (2000), met three key social needs desired by school administrators during that particular time period. First, he argued that they attempted to educate or "Christianize" the Native Americans (p. 34). This practice was even specifically stated in the charters of some of America's oldest institutions, such as Dartmouth (Thelin, 2004). Second, Harvard served to develop an "indigenous" and trained labor force (Mauch, p. 34). Third, 17th century clergymen trained at Harvard were a vital part of society since they possessed most of the knowledge and were critical factors in the development and spread of literacy (Mauch). Mauch concluded that these three factors were essential in establishing the base for an emerging industrialized economy.

Given this historical context and the United States' economic success today, it does not seem far-fetched that higher education can stimulate economic growth within the African context. However, the conditions of Sub-Saharan Africa today differ greatly from those of 17th century New England. In a context different from Harvard and its focus on clergymen and Christianity, where should the African universities focus in order to stimulate growth? One argument is that technology and the sciences should become the primary focus of African higher

education.

Re-Focusing the University Mission: Becoming an Economic Driver

Why science and technology? The international community, who is investing in higher education, believes that having an education system focused on science, technology, and engineering will help bring economic growth, poverty reduction, and improvement of standard of living (Tan, 2006). At one point in time, these international donor institutions disregarded the importance of higher education as being vital to the development of the African nations. Consequently, efforts were placed on enrolling students at the primary and secondary education levels. The common thought was that “tertiary education,” another term for post-secondary education, would have little impact in alleviating poverty (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006, p. iii). Some even argue that the international donor communities have been indirectly responsible for the neglect of higher education by some African governments (Bloom et al.).

In the mid-1980s, the World Bank set aside funds for investment into higher education, but when international organizations began to advocate for an increase in enrollment rates and education quality within the primary and secondary education levels, monetary support for higher education decreased significantly. Between 1985 and 1989, 17% of the World Bank’s worldwide education sector spending was focused on post-secondary education. This figure dropped to 7% between the years of 1995 and 1999 (Bloom et al., 2006, p. iii). Along with the decline in monetary investment, national enrollment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa dropped, as did graduation rates, quality of facilities, and academic research output at these various institutions.

Recently, there has been a re-awakening among the international donor communities. Through research and studies by various organizations, data have shown success in post-secondary education has many positive benefits for a country and its continuing development. These benefits can be viewed in two categories: the private and public sector (Bloom et al., 2006). In the private sector, higher education can foster improvements in employment prospects and salaries. These in turn can lead to greater ability to save, invest, or both, and ultimately allow individuals to maintain better health and a higher quality of life. In the public sector, a more robust higher education system can allow for what is referred to as “technological catch-up” (Bloom et al., p. iii). This is the notion that people, businesses, and society will become more technologically savvy and would be able to use technology better and more efficiently, to the degree that other developed nations are able to.

Ultimately, these efforts are expected to enable regions of Sub-Saharan Africa to

build economies that can produce output at their highest potential. Clearly, investors are providing support with the expectation that these nations will become better contributors to the global economy. They also expect these nations to become more industrialized, established, and complex economies that will sustain higher levels of global commerce. For example, these nations would have to better utilize their comparative agricultural advantages. Agricultural revitalization is the main goal in Sub-Saharan Africa, given the fact that 70% of people live in rural settings and that about 90% of those living in these rural settings depend on agriculture (Larsen, 2009). With so many people depending on the land for mere survival, a stronger agricultural economy would create a dramatic difference in the lives of many individuals. The question being asked is, “What can education do to help?” In some countries, universities have already begun to redirect their focus from arts and humanities to engineering and technological training that will directly improve the quality of infrastructure and other civic projects, particularly for agriculture.

In a sense, these universities would be doing what American universities were doing over 100 years ago. However, the needs of people in Sub-Saharan regions are vastly different than those of people living in the United States. African universities have less of a focus on liberal arts and more emphasis on technology and sciences that can be applied to the surrounding communities. The Kigali Institute of Science and Technology and Management (KIST) in Rwanda has helped implement innovative changes in local communities through technological development. In perhaps one of the better examples, the University of Zambia played a significant role in the creation of Zamnet, the largest internet provider in the country of Zambia (Dickson, 2005). University students showed that creativity, innovation, and ingenuity utilized for the good of society are attainable by an academic institution. The students are producing concrete and tangible services and innovations that benefit their communities. This is the goal of Juma and others of a similar mentality. The current goal is to create this same dynamic within other nations of Sub-Saharan Africa. For international stakeholders and investors, African universities can be used as a resource for the surrounding communities and local governments. The domino effect of positive trends that can be fostered through development of higher education will likely improve multiple forms of infrastructure and agricultural capacities, and should systematically produce a higher standard of living for a large portion of the African community.

Re-Colonization in Africa

There is a community of people who feel that what is taking place with international donor institutions and the African education system is a form of colonialism or “intellectual re-colonization” in Africa (Federici, 2000, p. 19). Re-colonization is in reference to the role that international agencies are playing in

the African system of higher education and the level of control that is being imposed on this region for the sake of investment returns. Federici argued that as a result of targeted aid, financial contributors heavily influence what is written, studied, and voiced in communities. There already exists great opposition to exploitation that has existed on the continent for a number of generations. The mere existence of the Shell oil company in some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa has been a long-ensuing debate. The concept of re-colonization is one that deeply touches the lives of many Africans. One must take into account that many regions of Luso-Africa and Franco-Africa, Portuguese and French colonies respectively, were given their independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these countries have just recently emerged from colonialism, and there are thousands, perhaps millions, of people who have lived through those times and are currently still on the continent.

First hand experiences of my own allow me to speak to these on-going tensions between the colonizers and the colonized. Some of my immediate family members have lived in Africa during the time of European colonialism. Through conversation with numerous individuals, including my parents, I have learned that the time period between 1950 and 1979 was a time of great resentment and angst toward European colonialism, discrimination, and exploitation of workers, minerals, and resources. Upon liberation, foreign governments departed without leaving systems in place for developing nations to progress, and some governments collapsed or fell into civil war. Unlike past colonialism, there are seemingly good intentions in revamping the higher education system. The central concern about African higher education in 2009 is that autonomy is being lost due to the extensive involvement of external parties. Much of the research conducted in the interest of the African education system is commissioned by external international agencies like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Federici, 2000). Another concern is that the success of an African university is becoming more and more linked to the ability to have a partnership with foreign donors motivated by potential economic returns. The fear of dependency is overwhelming.

In a Darwinian sense, institutions that are funded, supported, and arguably controlled by foreign agencies would survive and prosper in this restructuring of higher education. This concept is dramatically different than what usually occurs in the United States. If considered in the context of North America, many would find it difficult for U.S. institutions to be comfortable with the idea of surrendering their autonomy in such a way. Having to weigh the progress and development of education and economy for its citizens against independence and the freedom of decision-making power may pose a conflict for African governments. Declining to comply with the expectations of funding agencies would likely result in reduced funding, which has occurred in some instances already. The result, due

to lack of appropriate funding, is what a Nigerian newspaper described as having to study “with tears now in Africa” (Federici, 2000, p. 20).

Conclusion

The progression toward modern colonialism in Africa is one that unfortunately seems inevitable. Like an immovable machine, the UN, World Bank, and others continue to sponsor a project that will ultimately leave the future of African academia and research in the hands of the global powers of Europe and the United States. Unfortunately, where monetary investment is significant, it is almost impossible to expect ethics to be a major factor in the decision-making process. The African continent has had its future out of its hands since the 1500s, the point of European arrival in Africa. In a time where African nations are looking to reclaim their autonomy and live out independence in its truest sense, this new wave of foreign investors has once again staked its claim among the African lands. Long viewed throughout history as a place of great potential, the African continent has been a place vulnerable to exploitation from external parties. It is hardly plausible that the well-being of the African people and interests of international donor agencies are perfectly aligned. In essence, the question is, “Whose interests are the top priority in these matters?”

It is difficult to embrace the thought of African nations being controlled by organizations. This thought is especially difficult when one considers that academic investments come with the expectation of future economic returns and hopes of commerce. Historically, commerce involving the African continent has been a one-sided arrangement where more resources left the continent than were ever created. This trend can be seen in the recent history of the oil industry in Angola, Nigeria, and other nations. Had these foreign investments been one-time donations to aid the revival of higher education, the perception of intent may have differed. However, it is almost impossible for African humanitarians and sons of Africa, like me, to ignore the future well-being of a generation sliding down this slippery slope.

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