

Constructing a continent

Nepad's aim is to get all 53 countries working towards increasing capacity

Percy Zvomuya

Africa's ills would vanish if the West and other partners poured billions of aid money into its coffers, conventional wisdom goes. But what this view overlooks is the inability of many African governments to implement projects designed, as the cliché goes, to make poverty history.

Not long after Nepad's launch in 2001 in Abuja, Nigeria, its heads of state and government implementation committee called for the capacities of regional economic communities to be enhanced so that Nepad programmes could be implemented.

Over the years, civil society has observed that these grand continental and government projects are not implemented. Projects Nepad is working on are in tourism (the action plan and human resources development in public sector tourism), science (in the design of science, technology and innovation indicators), the African Biosciences Initiative and others.

Although funding is routinely a problem, Nepad has, in cases, been able to access funding from member states, the World Bank and other lending institutions. But it is crucially in building and developing capacity at member state and regional levels that most of these projects must come to fruition.

When Kaduna Business School signed a partnership agreement with Nepad last year, Chinyere Asika, an adviser to outgoing Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo on Nepad, said the sole goal of the process was "sustainable development in Nigeria and Africa through human capacity building".

Yet Africa's youths are seen roaming the streets, unemployed, while the various stakeholders agree that the struggle to make the continent prosperous is shouldered by the youth.

Prince Mashele, a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, said the challenges that face the many projects being conceived lie in implementation. Much depends not on the Nepad secretariat but on the individual member states and "political will

and material capacity" of the member countries.

"If there is no money to invest, and if Nepad cannot raise funds, there will be nothing on the ground," he said. He pointed out that the main problem in implementing programmes is technical capacity, planning and engineering. "You can have money and policies in place, but without technical capacity, what can you do?"

Other analysts said a look at the various construction projects going on across the continent and the abundance of foreign — especially Chinese — engineering firms shows that Africa suffers technical constraints.

Hesphina Rukato of Nepad stressed that there can be no economic integration, for instance, if there is no infrastructure linking the different regional economic communities, or common laws around customs. "Member states build the region rather than vice versa," she said, adding that the SADC's strength, for example, is a manifestation of the strength of the individual countries that make up the bloc.

Mashele, however, argued that integration was happening, spurred on by market imperatives and not by active policies of member states. He gave the example of the SADC region, where "there is a seamless connection in terms of roads, telecommunications and ports". Another example is the West Africa gas pipeline, which is being built to supply clean and affordable energy in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana.

Rukato said that active cooperation among member states should be in all areas. "If it's a problem of teachers in Kenya, we should look at how Rwanda can help. This is a programme of action that says, before we look abroad, let's look at our own people in Africa." Essentially, this course of action recognises that a region cannot do much if there are no "collective strategies". "If the problem is food security, there is no way Ghana can progress if there are problems in Nigeria," she said by way of example.

Mashele said Nepad's capacity-building programmes are not made easier by the fact that some



An unidentified woman carries her tapioca after drying it near a gas flare belonging to the Shell oil company in Utorogun, Nigeria. Integration is happening through the West Africa gas pipeline, being built to supply clean and affordable energy in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana.
Photograph: AP

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countries are not committed to the programme itself. Capacity constraints will not be overcome overnight. It takes up to seven years to train a doctor and, if a country is to overcome a shortage of health professionals, this could not be done "overnight". And, once these capacities are put in place, there is the added challenge of retaining them. Africa is suffering from a brain drain because of its inability to retain much-needed skills.

Rukato spoke of the need to "empower communities" and "view development as a demand-supply situation". One of the ways to develop a community's capacity is by ensuring a "leadership transformation process", which recognises the fact that "leadership is at every level".

"Every teacher, every head girl at school, are leaders in their own right," she said. It is in this spirit that communities should be constantly on the lookout for leadership qualities "that should be replicated" and recognised in order to drive communities forward.

"At a political level we are saying the deal is done. The political leaders have shown their commitment to transforming the continent. The challenge is to distil the vision to a simple woman in the rural areas." Rukato stressed that this would not be achieved by telling people what to do, but rather by involving them in programmes and projects that empower them to do more for themselves.

She said the Nepad secretariat is working at a national level, urging states to integrate the Nepad values, principles and projects into their own development plans and put money into their implementation. "How committed are our member states to putting money into HIV/Aids and many other programmes designed to make poverty history?"

Rukato was cautious in her optimism: "The fact that we are ambitious does not mean we'll achieve all this overnight." Development is a long-term process, particularly given the complexity of working with an entire continent.

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