

Africa: permanent underdog?

by Adebayo Adedeji

Africa today presents a remarkable paradox: it has, on the one hand, an increasing population of mostly young, energetic people, eager to learn and to work but without jobs, sinking gradually into poverty and despair, and, on the other hand, a staggering regional endowment of resources. The missing factors are not simply know-how, self-confidence and the will to cooperate but the lack of purposeful, single-minded development-oriented determined leadership needed to engineer the socio-economic transformation of the country with a minimum of delay.

Africa is the heart of the Third World. Her problems and perspectives are symptomatic of those of the entire Third World. Africa must wrench herself from her present state of underdevelopment, and transform her economy into a dynamic, self-sustaining one, before we can say with confidence that Africa need not always be the economic backwater of the international economic system.

As President Shehu Shagari of Nigeria put in a statement to the 35th session of the United Nations General Assembly last fall: "Africa bears the scars of a long history of spoliation and deprivation, of the ravages of slave trade and foreign aggression, and of both political and economic injustices. The current crisis in the world economy is wreaking havoc in Africa. For some areas of the Third World, the ongoing negotiations may mean growth through effective participation in key international markets and institutions, but for most of Africa these negotiations are about survival itself. The very existence of some of our nations is being critically threatened by adverse economic forces and natural disasters." The economic transformation of Africa is therefore central to the socio-economic resurgence of the Third World.

Although one of the characteristics of underdevelopment in Africa is the paucity of statistical information and the poor quality of what is available, the impact of planned development and economic growth on African individuals since the beginning of the first decade of political independence in the 1960s can be measured to some extent. The World Bank classified the 43 African countries on which statistical information was available in 1977 as follows: 27 were low-income countries with Gross National Product (GNP) per inhabitant of less than U.S. \$360; 15 were middle-income countries with GNP per inhabitant of between \$360 and \$3,500; and only one, the Socialist Peoples Libyan Arab Jamahiriye, was a capital-surplus oil exporter — with per inhabitant gross national product \$6,680 in 1977. The growth rate of GNP per inhabitant

for the 43 countries ranged from -0.9 to 7.8 percent per annum between 1960 and 1977. During the last seven years of this period, it ranged from -3.6 to 9.9 percent per annum. In fact, between 1960 and 1977, seven countries recorded negative growth rates while between 1970 and 1977, 15 countries recorded negative growth rates. The growth rates of 26 of the countries declined between the two periods from 1960-1977 and 1970-1977. In other words, the situation worsened between 1960 and 1977.

A greater part of the poor performance which the GNP has exhibited has been due to the poor performance of the agriculture and food sector. Indeed, over the past two decades, the situation in that sector has deteriorated rapidly. Today, each person in the region has, on the average, considerably less access to food than was the case ten years ago. Average dietary standards have fallen below nutritional requirements. The annual growth rate in agricultural and particularly food output has consistently been lower than the annual population growth rate in many countries of the region. In fact, of the 38 countries for which information is available, only ten improved their food production in 1976-78 period compared to 1969-1971 period. Yet agriculture still accounts for about 40 per cent and more of the gross domestic product in 21 of the 38 countries. The situation in industry, including mining, energy and manufacturing, is no better. This is despite the fact that the continent is noted for its mineral and energy resources.

The ultimate purpose of development and economic growth is to improve the lot of individuals. Such an improvement depends not only on the availability of goods (agricultural and industrial products) but also on such important services as health, education, housing and participation of workers in the development process. There is no doubt that significant progress was made between 1960 and 1977 in the field of education, particularly in primary education in an encouraging number of countries. But the situation still leaves much to be desired.

Despite figures which fail to distinguish between recipients of health services and the quality of services received, the health situation did improve a bit. There

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