

Is there hope for Africa?

by Richard Sandbrook

Anticipation and excitement — these were the sentiments that infused African studies in the early 1960s when I took my first university courses. Most of us expected great things to emerge from Africa. Perhaps, we thought, the long suffering of African peoples would produce a new kind of person, one committed above all to collective betterment. Our perspective was romantic — and profoundly unfair. Suffering and powerlessness do not generate any special virtue. Skeptics now, we endorse Ayi Kwei Armah's despairing view that "The Beautiful Ones are not yet born."

Today, many conclude that Africa's future is bleak, especially Subsaharan, or tropical Africa — that part of the continent between the desert and southern Africa and the concern of this article. But this is not the official view of professional developmentalists employed by national or international development agencies. Publicly, they speak of Africa's problems, but also of the "vast potential" of nations bubbling with the "ferment of development." Privately, however, these officials are often less sanguine.

For something *has* gone wrong. The unpalatable fact is that the economic, social and political promise of *uhuru*, of independence, is generally not being realized. Economic crisis, persistent mass poverty and inequality, and a drift towards military intervention in politics constitute the predominant trends.

Economic crisis

Subsaharan Africa, the poorest region of the world's least developed continent, is in danger of maintaining that unenviable position. In the World Bank's 1982 list of thirty-three "Low Income Economies," no fewer than twenty are in Tropical Africa. The data enumerated below indicate the unlikelihood that these economies will escape their plight, unless major changes in direction occur. Consider these:

(1) For most Africans, the *economic outlook* has been grim since 1960. A weighted annual growth rate below 1 percent per capita is recorded for the twenty-four low-income countries of Subsaharan Africa (see Table 1). Indeed, only nine of the thirty-nine countries for which data exist achieved a per capita growth rate of 2.5 percent per annum in 1960-80, and three of these were oil exporters. In the 1970s no fewer than fifteen economies registered a *negative* growth rate of per capita income. By 1980, even such high-growth countries as the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Kenya and Malawi experienced severe economic difficulties.

(2) *Agriculture*, the livelihood for 60 to 90 percent of

the populations, has performed dismally. Subsaharan Africa, in 1960, was more or less self-sufficient in foodstuffs. But between 1960 and 1980 food production increased by only 2 percent per year while population grew by about 3 percent. A growing dependence on food imports resulted. Subsaharan Africa will have to import one-third of its food requirements by the year 2000, if current trends continue. Even the production of export crops has slumped: increases in output in the 1960s were obliterated in the 1970s. For countries which depend for their foreign exchange upon the export of primary commodities, the implications are catastrophic.

(3) Overall *industrial growth* in the 1970s has been slightly more impressive, with thirteen of thirty-four reporting countries achieving annual rates of over 5 percent. But these figures can mislead. Note, first, that growth rates are inflated by the initially small industrial base on which they are calculated. Secondly, the fifteen middle-income economies — in particular the oil exporters (see Table 1) — accounted disproportionately for the industrial output, while the low-income majority lagged behind. Finally, the appropriateness of the *pattern* of industrial development is questionable. As is well known, manufacturing in this region typically relies upon capital-intensive, skill-intensive and import-intensive technologies provided by the multinationals. Production is oriented mainly to the processing of primary exports and the local assembly or production of "non-essential" consumer goods for the relatively privileged minority. Thus, manufacturing growth generates little in terms of employment and incomes either directly (within manufacturing industries) or indirectly (by means of backward and forward linkages to other economic sectors). And the modern manufacturing sector does not produce the goods needed to satisfy the basic needs of the poor majority.

(4) Severe *balance of payments crises* were evident by the late 1970s or early 1980s. Africa's agricultural decline, worsening terms of trade with the North, rising bills for oil imports, increasing interest rates on foreign debt, and declining receipt of foreign aid combined to produce this

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