

Missing Institutional Foundations (Isintu, Ubuntu, and Ubukhosi in a social contract) to Economic Development: Zimbabwe's Experience since 1980

ABSTRACT

It has been almost 50 years since Africa began shedding colonial rule. While most of the colonies became free without violence, some had to be freed by “wars of liberation” of one kind or another. The leaders of these post-colonial societies have practiced varying degrees of tenure in the high office. In Sub-Saharan Africa, few can be said succeeded in leaving office in dignity and with their people in prosperity.¹ Many have either died in office or have been forcibly removed after imposing intolerable suffering on their people. Whatever the nationalist slogans employed during and after “independence,” what is clear is that the promises made then: the transition to independence, promises of a better life via sustained economic that started in Africa and Asia has been anything but a series of catastrophic events.²

Fifty years is sufficiently long a time period for those concerned with economic development to begin the process of accounting for the failure of post-colonial governments to improve the material well being of their citizens. Such accounting must be broad enough to include political, social, and economic and whatever else can be said about the failure of nationalists to deliver equitable material improvements to their societies. For those who may have stayed in power at all costs, the biggest problem has been the failure to understand that to sustain power in the long run must be accompanied by increasing material prosperity to ordinary citizens via growth and not confiscatory policies. Equally important has been the failure to recognize that for development purposes, the State has never been an efficient mechanism for generating growth, notwithstanding the claims of socialists during the heyday of revolutions in the 1960s through the 1970s. Some Asians nationalists who have kept power for long periods did so because they recognized this simple fact.

¹ Seretse Khama (Botswana), Houighet (Ivory Coast), Mandela (South Africa) and others have been exceptions.

² Vietnam, Philippines Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and North Korea exhibit similar characteristics to those found in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Unfortunately, the debate on some of the causes of the failure of the post-colonial African state to deliver economic growth and hence improve the standard of living for a majority of Africans has not yielded any significant fruits.

There is a tendency among Africanists (those who study all facets of African life regardless of their nationality) to examine these failures within a framework that categorizes some factors that may have led to this state of affairs as either external or internal constraints. Almost without exception, politicians, policymakers, and unfortunately some academics tend to focus exclusively on identifying external factors that undermine developments in these countries. Depending on the time period, these factors include the IMF and World Bank programs, colonialism and its residual effects, and a host of conspiracies by developed countries against developing countries. The effect of this singular focus on external factors is that it diverts attention from internal factors, which may in fact account for the disastrous economic performance of almost all African countries. Briefly, such factors are the failure of post-colonial African governments to integrate and complement traditional customs and rules, a singular focus on national consensus under the “nation-building” concept with no concern for ethnic diversity, and the failure to devise political, economic, and social arrangements that are based on reciprocity, self-interest and are self-policing in nature. For lack of a better word, these are deemed “missing institutional foundations” in the paper.

In Hobbes, the social contract is viewed as an alternative to the existence in a “state of nature.” Indeed, his “state of nature” was very unpleasant since he envisaged it as being a “war of all against all.” Some have suggested a parallel of the state of nature and the scenario for which the Prisoner’s Dilemma or some other game serve as a model. As an alternative, Hobbes saw only the voluntary surrender by all of their rights and liberties into the hands of an absolute sovereign (dictator, military leader etc). Both his view of human nature then and his preferred alternative are unlikely to find wide voluntary acceptance today, although some versions of the alternative may indeed exist in Sub-Saharan Africa. For economists who work strictly within their discipline, the failures of post-colonial governments have been understood as largely arising from “missing financial links” in macroeconomic models or funding models.

However, I suggest that the problems have to do with the failure to construct new social contracts to which all if not the majority of members of society can be shifted by mutual consent and not coercion. One relies on assumptions normally found in neoclassical economics to integrate missing institutional pieces such as *isintu*, *ubuntu*, and *ubukhosi* to partly explain Zimbabwe's experience since 1980. The meaning of the terms are given as follows. **Isintu**, among other things, embodies the notion of ubuntu. In fact, it captures the common understandings of people (such as conventions, customs, habits, moral principles, rules of thumb, traditions and the like) that are important in regulating or coordinating interactions among people who be driven by enlightened self-interest to consent to a new social contract.

The principle of *ubukhosi* is founded on the principle of **ubuntu** (humaneness), which expresses itself metaphorically in the statement, “ *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (people are people through other people). It emphasizes the respect for human dignity (and yet allows for orderly reciprocal changes to human relations) and clear observation of customs and rules as represented by the practice of the traditional leaders. The concept promotes conciliation at the expense of confrontation at all levels within that society. Although *ubuntu* expresses a distinctly African notion of reciprocity and community, it is not without problems as evidenced by present events in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa.

Often times during violent conflicts (the murder of white farmers, African members of the opposition, teachers, and ordinary rural villagers) and times when violent crimes against both persons and property are rife, distraught members of society decry the loss of *ubuntu*. Thus, heinous crimes can be seen as the antithesis of *ubuntu* to most Africans in Zimbabwe. According to this view, the treatment of citizens (regardless of color) that is cruel, inhuman or derogatory is bereft of *ubuntu*. The core lesson to be drawn from *ubuntu* is that the survival of people depends on voluntary cooperation with each other; reciprocal arrangements and self-policing structures. The concept of **ubukhosi** (the institution of traditional leadership) has not changed for hundreds of years although the particulars have had to change since the concept is also a dynamic one. *Ubukhosi*, the cultural values, norms, traditions and customs, all combine to ensure that even in the midst of all economic difficulties facing Zimbabwe at this time, including the land question, there shall be respect for human life and dignity, and respect for law and order. This is the way of

life traditional leaders want to retain for the people. The concept of *ubukhosi* can form a strong foundation for reciprocal social contract where any proposed constitutional arrangements clearly reflect the aspirations of all people.