Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Think Tank Resource for Africa

by

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Abstract

In the years since post-European colonial independence, African countries have tried to improve their economic condition with the help of European, IMF, and/or World Bank sponsored aid packages. These assistance programs, though promoted as benevolent, have actually, by-and-large, exacerbated national poverty and infrastructure decay because of their structure, design, and associated stipulations. From these experiences, it is clear that Africa must be ingenious in designing solutions for economic and technology uplift that depend, with greatest weight, upon use of its own human and natural resources. In the Pan-African sense, HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) in the United States, with use of their graduates, faculty, and/or facilities, can provide economic/policy management advice and technology transfer to African nations and other Black countries. Thus this paper explores the parameters in which Black institutions of higher learning can facilitate Africa's development on multiple fronts.

In the years following post-European colonial independence, the African continent has undergone the effects and “growing pains”, trying numerous strategies and initiatives aimed at developing the infrastructure and jump starting the economies of its nations. Yet, very few of these efforts have yielded substantive and tangible rewards for Africa on either the national or regional level; many nations, as an initial venture, focused on North-South bilateral cooperation as a conduit for economic and industrial development, as bilateral cooperation was conceptually envisioned and organized around interactions / partnerships between a Northern hemisphere country (i.e. European; rich; industrialized) and a Southern hemisphere country (i.e. African or non-White; poor; developing) with aims of establishing a one-way transfer of technological/economic assistance and resources from the rich nations to the poor ones.

This kind of assistance to developing countries has shown its limitations, particularly in Africa, because aid is often allocated and directed to foreign/non-indigenous corporations/firms (operating in the recipient nations) that are of the same national origin as the donor country; moreover, the aid-receipt stipulations usually favor projects of interest to businesses and enterprise ventures from the donor country. In this scenario, the allotted/earmarked money never really reaches the donor country, but merely is re-circulated back to the origin-point donor country via their national corporations; subsequently, its impact on economic growth and development has been negligible because countries funding the projects conduct and design them for self-advantage and benefit, and at best, the recipient countries are passive participants to any of the projects.

Many have hoped that a multilateral approach to development and economic relief with use of such international organizations/agencies as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank would bring more fairness to the system than did the bilateral concept. Unfortunately, the interventions of these organizations have done very little to help Africa while (in fact) they have exacerbated poverty and indebtedness (Shah, 2005). In this second scenario, the economic programs imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, particularly throughout Africa, require drastic internal reductions in spending on health, education and development amongst recipient nations in order to repay the loan debt owned to donor nations; thus, as financial resources are drained in loan payback and associated high interest rates, no money is available to tackle issues of socioeconomics and health such as poverty and a declining life expectancy. Thus, per capita GDP that grew 30% in the last two decades following 1960s-independence fell by 15% in the next two decades after intervention of the IMF and the World Bank which involved imposed drastic measures for African recipient nations, e.g. employment salaries cut in half; no more financial assistance to students to pay for school; devaluation of the national currency and associated corollaries, i.e. price inflation on necessity goods and the erosion of the national healthcare system infrastructure.

Consequently, budget cuts in education, health, and nutrition programs jeopardize the socioeconomic vitality and potential of a nation and therefore become anti-progressive. Either the IMF or the World Bank doesn't realize that their policies (supposedly aimed at helping Africa's nations) are harmful to multi-nation development or (if they did) are hypocrites. More recently, Poverty Reduction Strategies Papers (PRSPs) have replaced Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The substitution of PRSPs for SAPs is viewed by many as simply delivering repackaged SAPs with the same glaring weaknesses, e.g. failure to orchestrate practical poverty-focused development plans ; non-involvement of the civil society and parliamentarians in economic policy discussions (Bretton Woods Project: 2001).

From these experiences, it is clear that Africa cannot grow and develop when non-Africans design its future; therefore African themselves must spearhead, initiate, and direct efforts to transition from underdevelopment to prosperity. In light of this, Africa's people living inside and outside of Africa must join forces in collective ventures aimed at improving the economic and technical development of their ancestral homeland.

A framework must be designed to use black expertise in needed areas as a means to boost economic/technical development. HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) can serve as the framework. Numbering 105, they are institutions of higher learning erected in the United States with the specific, historical purpose of educating African American students (Department of the Interior, 2006) that must be maintained as living repositories of Pan-African culture, thought, and intellect actively engaged in the education and training of African American students and others of the African Diaspora. Since technology infrastructure supports industrial/economic development and progress in any country, HBCUs, in the Pan-African sense, can provide economic/policy management advice and technology transfer to African nations and other Black countries; furthermore, with the proper tooling and a focused emphasis on critical thinking, these institutions can operate as research centers in providing industry and nations (particularly African and Caribbean) with customized technical expertise and problem-specific consulting assistance on multiple fronts via the use of their graduates, faculty, and/or facilities/physical resources. Hence, HBCUs can serve as multi-regional think tanks for designing and implementing strategies for the economic and technology uplift for Africa's nations and other Black countries (MSN Encarta: 2005).

Collaborative program pairings along with the resource strength of faculty expertise can be developed between HBCUs and African Universities, e.g. joint research linkups in agriculture to address clean water and malnutrition issues; medicine/pharmacy partners to find cures for diseases mainly affecting Blacks, especially diabetes, hypertension, and HIV/AIDS.

The export of skilled advisors, teachers and workers with custom-requested expertise in an assortment of areas (technology, engineering, education, agriculture, management, health, economics, …) deployed to developing nations, particularly in Africa, can be orchestrated in exchange for mineral/mining rights (diamonds, gold, tantalum, …) and investment opportunities (energy, telecommunications, real estate, sugar, …) from target countries as adequate financial compensation and revenue (Katembo, 2003). Indeed, the idea of HBCUs being catalysts for linking African-American businesses with Africa and for being advisors to African nations from the business/technology perspective is "right on point" and represents a concept whose time has come.

Another key area of cooperation is in policy consulting and advisory. Africa suffers from bad policy management and design having negative short-term and long-term consequences; the design models chosen are often implemented with the help of foreign governments whose interests do not coincide with those of African countries. The importance of this problem is paramount and cannot be ignored because many policy makers in Africa lack the experience needed to analyze, critique and scrutinize policies brought by foreign advisors. There are numerous HBCUs that have departments and institutes of policy management that can be utilized as a resource to review and troubleshoot existing economic and development policies in various nations; and new policies (where necessary) can be designed to suit the needs and best interests of a specific nation.

Black thinkers from multiple areas of expertise regardless of employment sector (HBCUs, predominantly White universities, and industry) are needed to retool and redevelop Africa. A database can be compiled to identify the human capital available in each area of expertise. With one-hundred and five HBCUs and a Black purchase power of about 762 billion dollars annually (2006 figures), the re-focus of African-American attention in the business and educational sectors will create immense opportunities for Blacks globally (i.e. in Africa, the U.S., and elsewhere) as Africa 's nations emerge as viable markets for commerce and investment (Beirne, 2006).

Correspondingly, initiatives and discussions on Africa spearheaded by HBCUs will most certainly prompt and encourage African-American businesses to redeploy in Africa . AGOA (The African Growth and Opportunity Act), signed into law on May 18, 2000. is promoted and touted as offering tangible incentives for African countries to continue their efforts to open their economies and build free markets (AGOA, 2005), but regardless of the promotion, trade agreements such as this cannot invigorate African economies because production is a prerequisite for trade. African economies cannot yet fully take advantage of AGOA because their production capabilities are so weak that trade with the USA can only be marginal. African economies lack large-scale production capabilities because of a deficit in capital, i.e. accumulated assets as in money and equipment (Dictionary.Com, 2006).

The ability and resources with which to invest in equipment, machines and tools needed to produce goods and services are keys to increasing productivity; thusly, accumulated wealth is the backbone of economic growth. Therefore, an arrangement in which Black businesses from the United States invest heavily in Africa to produce goods and services could be the solution to Africa's problems. Of course, a business-friendly climate and the rule of law must be created throughout the sociopolitical landscape of Africa to attract international business immigration and investment from any ethnic or national persuasion. Some special incentives that African nations could offer to African-American businesses who choose to relocate or franchise in Africa could include: 1) tax-free status during the early years of deployment, 2) extremely business-friendly tax code (i.e. very low corporate taxes imposed upon businesses by the government); 3) investment tax credits; and 4) automatic citizenship for business owners and other relocated personnel.

In order for the above Pan-African partnership to work, African countries and HBCUs must have a common agenda for progress with mutual benefits for all parties involved. Since Africa is the ancestral home of Black people, then native Africans and African-Americans (or any other Blacks of the Diaspora) have a vested interest in working together. African countries need partners in development that can be trusted; thus African-Americans and other Africans of the Diaspora (i.e. Jamaicans, Barbadians, Haitians, Afro-Brazilians, etc.) should be natural allies in such ventures. Again, because of the reasons mentioned at the onset of the discussion, Africa cannot rely on outsiders for its own development. Reality dictates that intra-trade among the Pan-African community can only be sustained when all parties involved have incentives to participate in it; therefore, African-American trade with Africa must not be based solely upon ancestry and historical legacy, but rather upon the benefits of mutual interaction. In exchange for the immigration of African-American businesses into specific nations, those targeted countries, in return, could provide funds to HBCUs which have agreed to conduct research and provide advisors and training to areas of interest and critical need.

As collaborative ventures are initiated and fine-tuned, more successful innovations concerning technical and economic development can be implemented; an ongoing, constructive dialogue amongst African people will cultivate and produce the genesis of new ideas, and the refinement of old ones. Moreover, if we look at the history of economic development across the globe, no country has ever developed relying on the philanthropy of other nations. Asian countries (e.g. China, South Korea, Singapore, India and others) are emerging from poverty today because they have been able to count on themselves (their people and their culture). Doing so, they control their own destiny. International Organizations (World Bank, IMF and other agencies) set up after WWII first serve the interests of rich countries that provide them with funding, and even with the best intentions of their staff, their policies will do little to bring Africa out its present crisis.

A different approach and a radical change in development policies are what Africa needs for ongoing economic survival and growth. With its natural resources, and the human resource capabilities of its Diaspora, Africa's economies could be quickly jump started by long-term efforts, innovations and ingenuity of the Pan-African community.

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