Re-examining Current Paradigms and Concepts: Rural Development, Environmental Sustainability, and Poverty Alleviation in Africa

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Abstract

In the past two decades, donor agencies and their sponsors have developed new micro-level and local paradigms to address the problems of rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation. Their ultimate intention is to bypass and substitute for allegedly poorly functioning and corrupt African nations. However, nations are still responsible for the administrative machinery of government within which other entities operate, and many non-state actors are only nominally independent. Hence, technical initiatives stemming from these paradigms, aimed at growth and equity are often theoretically misconceived and tend to fail when implemented. This article critically discusses some of the new paradigms, including decentralization, civil society, micro-entrepreneurship, and capacity building. It concludes by suggesting that these paradigms should dynamically address the problems of development currently faced by the developing nations of Africa instead of chasing shadows.

Introduction

It is a truism that terms such as rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation are poorly defined and elusive. At best, they represent desired end states. Earlier paradigms of development were largely Keynesian and centered on the state, laying a strong emphasis on growth. More recent understandings have negated that early belief. Analysts no longer see the nation as the engine of production, growth, and equity. Instead, new paradigms support the local over the national, civil society in preference to government, and micro-entrepreneurship rather than industrialization as the way to overcome absolute, acute and disproportionate poverty and achieve sustainable rural development. The private sector rather than the state is seen as the preferred supplier of agricultural services, whether speaking of marketing, credit, or input supply. Furthermore, lapses in reaching desired end states tend not to critique these means-ends hypotheses themselves. Instead, excuses about the lack of capacity and participation are proposed as a justification for the failure to appreciate what is the real problem (Kuhn, 1996).

Notwithstanding the many issues and questions that have arisen in the application of these new paradigms, there is still a strong belief in their ability to contribute more effectively to rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation than past approaches. Like the pure sciences, donors and academics tend to cling to their paradigms. Unlike them, paradigms tend to shift when they are unfashionable or politically out of tune rather than when they are wrong.

This article raises a few major questions and discusses some of the pressing issues that have emerged when these new paradigms of development have been applied in the field. The intent is to highlight problems faced by rural people on a daily basis in the face of these new paradigms. Our hope is that the analysis below will lead to critical thinking about the paradigms themselves and the means to achieve them, thereby raising a few questions about current thinking and what is to be done in the future. Section 2 extensively discusses the concept of decentralization and attempts to show how it fails to bring development to the rural communities because of the existing and entrenched patron-clients cleavages already existing, and differing level of access to state power. Section 3 assesses the possible contributions of the civil society toward the actualization of sustainable development in Africa. It also examines its problems and prospects. Section 4 analyses the relationships between the macro-micro sectors and the problems created by donor agencies in their efforts to separate them as if they existed in isolation. Section 5 addresses the problems of sustainable rural development and poverty alleviation, particularly those accentuated by donor agencies that tend to ignore the dynamic realities that both affect and characterize the rural poor. In section 6, the article evaluates the impact of donors' policy encouraging de-industrialization to the development of small enterprises. Marketing, input supply and rural financial services are at the nucleus of dynamic poverty alleviation strategies. Section 7 examines the private sector initiative encouraged by donor agencies targeted at eliminating the inefficiency of the state in providing these vital services.

Section 8 discusses the confusion arising from the introduction of poorly defined paradigms such as capacity-building and their impact on sustainable development. The article concludes that a number of these new paradigms discussed, instead of solving old and existing development problems are rather raising both conceptual problems and creating operational difficulties. It therefore, suggests their comprehensive and systematic re-evaluation.

Decentralization and Service Delivery

The concept of decentralization has become popular and a recurring theme in the plans and policies of international assistance agencies and developing nations in recent years (Rondinelli, 1981: 133). It involves the deconcentration and delegation of legal and political authority to plan, make decision and manage public functions from the central government to subordinate units of government, semi-autonomous public corporations, area-wide or regional development authorities; functional authorities, autonomous local governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Rondinelli, 1981: 137). Decentralization also involves the devolution of power from the central government to the local governments (Ezeani, 2004: 3).

Decentralization has become a central linchpin of the new paradigm of rural development. Its institutionalization is seen as an antidote to corrupt extractive nations that characteristically have exploited the rural poor, a means of improving service delivery to them, and the best way of encouraging popular participation so that rural people will participate in their own development (Hyden, 1983).

The above ideal-type vision of what would occur if this paradigm was put into practice is not necessarily what has happened. Instead, when decentralization has been implemented in Africa, two situations have commonly arisen: first, although decentralization was partly conceived as a way of overriding the nation of its negative characteristics, its implementation often has reproduced the state in another guise. Formally, decentralization is in place in the majority of African states. Informally, however, decentralized authorities are often just new clones of the nation (Nyerere, 1972; Conyers, 1974). When this happens, as it often does, decentralized authorities are no different than their predecessors: that is, not more accountable, not more democratic, and not more interested in the plight of the rural and urban poor, integrated rural development, or environmental sustainability than the centralized state preceding them. In addition, the rural poor sometimes have fewer avenues of redress than in the past when they could appeal to a less parochial and higher authority that was removed from their day-to-day situations. Instead, because rural communities are often highly stratified, authoritarian, corrupt, and repressive, as well as responsive to parochial interests, citizens often feel they cannot exercise their rights even when formally speaking, they have decentralized institutions through which they can articulate their grievances (Khalil, 2007).

The reality of decentralization is not always what is projected by donor agencies. Usually absent from the decentralization thinking are two fundamental elements. The first is that there is no uniformity among Africa's rural communities. Instead, class and patron-client relations stemming from complex cleavages based on family ties, ethnicity, religious differences, as well as differing levels of access to state power divide populations. These divisions and cleavages tend to reproduce themselves institutionally in decentralized authorities, often offering no improvements over the central state, and sometimes a further regression to the mean from the standpoint of the rural poor. The second is that the decentralization equation falls into an unfortunate intellectual trap: it assumes one can change the way in which organizations operate solely by making formal changes in institutions or by developing new organizations. As a matter of fact, this simplistic assumption is not true.

It is therefore, obvious from the above argument that similar formal institutions in different places operate differently because of different norms, belief systems, and enforcement mechanisms. These have been called "rules of the game" (North, 1994) and tend to change over long periods of history rather than overnight. This is apparent from what has happened when the decentralization paradigm has been put into practice in Africa. The results raise the broader question of whether the implementation of formally decentralized institutions is likely to achieve the mythical ends desired in the light of existing theories about change and development, as well as concrete realities on the ground.

It has been the central and generally erroneous argument of champions of decentralization that local authorities tend to be less corrupt, more accountable, and more likely to improve rural service delivery than the centralized state. In reality, this has not happened in the majority of those African nations that seem to champion decentralization and have institutionalized its basic structures. Nigeria is a very good example where decentralization is constitutionally institutionalized creating a third tier of government. However, its practice and applicability in the rural areas are generally wanting. Instead, by virtue of setting up multiple foci of fiscal autonomy, decentralized authorities have the potential to be no better than the centralized state on all of the above counts (Treisman, 2000).

The Nigerian example illustrate the observations of North (1994) that changing the formal rules of the game is far easier than transforming the informal rules of the game and the norms and incentive systems that support them. In addition, the fact that in the past, the state often has performed poorly does not imply that it is inherently incapable of being the engine and purveyor of dynamic change. In some African countries, it depends very much upon who is in charge, the tone that is set, and the degree to which the rule of law is entrenched and not on the intrinsic characteristics of the nation state per se (Joseph, 2003).

Our position is therefore that, instead of criticizing the shortcomings of African states, international development agencies should re-examine how they think about institutional change, both at the national and local level, and what they expect from it and under what conditions.

The paradigm of decentralization as a panacea for most rural ills has been elevated to a level not supported historically (Amsden, 1989; Amsden, Kochanowicz, and Taylor, 1994) or by current realities. It is important to face, whether with centralized or decentralized institutions, the day-to-day experiences of many of today's rural poor: lack of anonymity; fear of retribution and sanctions for criticizing the powers that be; few opportunities for genuine participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Green, 2000); and a lack of services, regardless of the formal characteristics of institutions.

Civil Society and Sustainable Development

Walzer (1991) defined civil society as the "space of uncoerced human association; a set of rational networks formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology that fills this space." According to Shaw and McLean (1996: 248) "civil society is comprised of the various non-governmental organizations, human rights groups, cooperatives, unions, media, religious assemblages, professional associations, and so on, through which individuals collectively and voluntarily carry out their social enterprises." The civil society is composed of reciprocity-based organizations not established by a state which are concerned with the betterment of man's life in society. They have a role to play in the actualization of sustainable development.

In a research carried in Italy, Putnam (1993) found an early and statistically significant relationship between the growth of non-state organizations and developmental effectiveness. This study followed the collapse of the Union of Soviets Socialist Republics (USSR) and a renewed emphasis by western donors on democratization in developing countries, particularly those of Africa. During this brief hiatus, western donors, in the majority, no longer found it geo-politically necessary to support corrupt and repressive regimes. For both reasons, donors promoted civil society organizations – particularly in African countries - as a means of circumventing and developing an antidote to states that were extracting more from their rural populations than they were investing to achieve sustainable rural development (Khalil, 2005).

Certainly, there are many excellent examples of what local populations and international donors can achieve by working with civil society organizations. Nevertheless, the assumptions both about civil society and what can be achieved with its assistance are often overblown and out of tune with the realities of rural life.

There has been a good deal of critical academic discussion on the concept of civil society and its applicability in many developing countries (Briton, 1989; Korten, 1990; Walzer, 1991; Lemarchand, 1992; McLean, 1993; Nyang'oro, 1993; Wellard and Copestake, 1993; Harbeson, et. al., 1994; Osaghae, 1995; Ndegwa, 1996; Shaw and McLean, 1996; Harris, 2002). Nevertheless, donors and international agencies have tended to analytically conflate NGOs with the concept of civil society. They have assumed, often incorrectly, that the former is synonymous with the latter, simply because NGOs are not legally or formally part of the state.

On the ground, the reality is that many NGOs in African countries are not necessarily part of civil society (Chabal and Daloz, 1998; Kasfir, 1998; Rahman, 2002). The very moment donors began assiduously to assist NGOs in preference to the state, numerous and sometimes questionable individuals, as well as relatives of state employees and even the state in a new guise, began to set up NGOs to attract 'foreign assistance.' Consequently, in many cases, NGOs represented vested interests both outside and inside the state, were not always distinguishable from it, were sometimes a means of aggrandizing foreign aid, and were not necessarily more attuned to the rural poor or sustainable development than government or other organizations (Korten, 1990; Wellard and Copestake, 1993).

In situations when NGOs have not been incorporated into the state in a new guise, they are not inherently preferable to it. This is because NGOs have, in some instances, been tied to local parochialisms, are not necessarily technically qualified to assume tasks that have been foisted upon them, and often lack a national vision of development. This notwithstanding, in the face of declining financial assistance leading to more and more privatization of aid, in addition to the current view of the state as the enemy of development, international agencies and other donors are working with the civil society, and with NGOs.

Macro-Micro and Sectoral Relationships

It is a fact that any critical analysis of contemporary paradigms dealing with rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation acknowledges the importance of government in setting sound macro-economic, political, and social policies. These policies determine the parameters of what is possible in terms of development. However, the tendency among international development organizations has been to separate the macro from the micro, as if the former does not matter. Within many of these agencies, disciplines and sectors also often operate in isolation from each other. However, poor rural people live in an integrated rather than a segmented world. It is a truism to say that the macro affects the micro and vice versa and that sectors do not exist in isolation (Deng, 1999).

However, often, one would hardly know this, looking at donor agencies' strategies and their lending operations. Several examples exist, some of which are discussed here. They demonstrate how such approaches lead to assistance packages that misconceive problems and solutions and hence are designed to fail in their attempt at promoting rural development or alleviating poverty (Adedeji, 1990, 1995).

Malawi received the patronage of donor agencies in the 1980s and 1990s. The assistance was targeted at pro-poor development strategy. Mostly, this consisted of rural development policies designed to support local producer groups and to increase the production of improved maize. In doing so, there was a failure to acknowledge one central macro-economic policy issue that radically reduced the possible effectiveness of these micro-level initiatives.

This was that government prohibited poor farmers on communal land from growing tobacco, the only lucrative cash crop. Until this policy changed, their incomes would not improve. Instead of dealing with this central economic policy of the state, donors, including most international organizations, spent considerable effort supporting local grassroots intermediaries to give credit to poor farmers to produce improved maize. This strategy was not economically viable. The result was that the problem was misconceived, farmers went into debt, and the proposed solutions did not work.

In the case of Uganda, donors assisted local groups to develop organizations to protect the environment in an area where the hills were virtually denuded. These hills were of marginal interest to community members because their livelihood was mostly nonfarm and did not stem from toiling their land. Hence, they did not have much incentive to put their labor into environmental protection. It is obvious that not enough time was spent analyzing how individuals from rural communities, who looked like farmers, made their income or what their incentives were to engage in certain types of rural development initiatives. These examples suggest that rural incomes and employment are usually multi-sectoral, and involving a strong nonfarm component. They are also directly affected both by macro-economic and national policy considerations (Bagachwa and Stewart, 1992; Barret, Reardon and Webb, 2001; Brycesson, 1996, 1999; Haggablade, Hazell and Reardon, 2006). It is, therefore, not possible to ignore the relationship between macro-level phenomena and micro-level behavior or to leave participation on social issues to anthropologists, political issues to political scientists, and economics to economists (Chambers and Conway, 1991; Ellis, 2000; Ellis and Freeman, 2004).

Related to the above is the fact that many seemingly perfect technical solutions are not perfectly extrapolated for all places and at all times. Agricultural economists have devised theoretically sound technical interventions that often are not implemented because of a lack of political will by government, because of household labor constraints that make it difficult for poor farmers to carry out the steps that would optimize production, or because of cultural prohibitions and various types of constraints that keep markets from operating (O'Brien and Ryan, 2001).

Addressing the Problems of Sustainable Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation

The daily lives of the rural poor should constitute the central departure point for donor agencies concerned with the problems of sustainable rural development and poverty alleviation. This approach will involve the integration of the micro and the macro, as well as the economic, political and socio-cultural realities of the rural poor. It has been observed that international organizations and donor agencies do not support the above increasingly important approach. There is little attempt to recruit individuals who can think cross-sectorally. Routine tasks are turned into pseudo-specialties.

One result is that agencies search for "experts" on NGOs, decentralization, poverty and other non-fields rather than for social scientists with sound training and solid analytical skills in one of the major established disciplines.

It has also been observed that the creation of new development jargons is a strategy by these donor agencies to run away from the dynamic reality of dealing with the above mentioned situation. These jargons include sustainable livelihoods, capacity-building, civil society, decentralization, informal education, appropriate technologies, micro-enterprises, rural financial intermediaries, and so on. They are intended to camouflage the need for a serious rethinking of issues, approaches, and questions concerning the soundness and utility of one solution over another. Instead, the tendency is to think in a segmented fashion about problems that require integrated thinking, not to appreciate the constant relationship between the micro and the macro, to ignore political considerations, to pretend that often powerful states do not exist, to turn mere tasks into nonexistent pseudo-disciplines, and to invent new jargon to homogenize extremely complex and diverse situations. The ultimate result is to seriously threaten, if not hamper, the ability of international agencies to address the very critical problems of rural development, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability today. Instead, the untouchable "isms" of bad jargon spewed forth by these new paradigms suppresses rather than invites questions (Asante, 2003).

Small Enterprise Development and De-Industrialization

In the majority of South-East Asian countries and in South Africa, available evidence show that the process of industrialization and the development of manufacturing spurred growth that led to the transformation of rural life. Contemporary development paradigms seem to be oblivious of this fact and now place their emphasis on small enterprise development. In the majority of developing countries, particularly those in Africa, the environment for economic investment, whether domestic or foreign, has been negative. Many countries still are locked in patterns of single-commodity production, often representing legacies from the colonial period. For poor farmers, this has meant experiencing something akin to the great depression of 1929 every few years (Collier, 2001).

Donor agencies have initiated discussions bordering on the diversification of rural livelihoods, while at the same time, encouraging the development of small enterprises. In part, this is a stopgap recognition that many rural poor are landless and that even others cannot rely on agriculture alone to survive. While these small enterprises constitute the real economy for many rural poor, they do not offer a substitute for employment, an assured wage, or much hope for improving their lives in the future. Instead, the rural poor overwork and under-consume. In such situations, what is produced often cannot be sold or markets for such products are limited due to gluts of similar products (whether agricultural or non-agricultural), lack of quality control, the high costs of transport, or international standards.

It has been observed that donor agencies and entrepreneurs engaged in small businesses often neglect to conduct in-depth feasibility studies to ascertain the viability to have a local rice factory, a fish feeds project, or to produce local potato seeds, tools, and crafts into something that can turn to a profit. It is a fact that much donor agencies' assistance for the formation of small enterprise is both unviable and unprofitable. The following examples will buttress our point: farmers in Lesotho, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire were encouraged to produce potato seeds only to discover that the same extension officers assisting them had, not only a nearby community do the same thing, but owned similar farms within the vicinity, thus resulting in a glut. Donors supported women with sewing machines to expand dressmaking in Mauritius. However, the liberalization of the market accompanying Mauritius's impressive economic transformation also crushed these businesses and others, as they could no longer compete either with factory-made garments made locally or with imports. Both were more competitive in terms of price and quality. In Nigeria, a pilot fish feeds project that might have been viable for one or two people produced almost no profits for a large group. In Mozambique, local farmers preferred to buy South African tools instead of what their own neighbors made because the quality of the former was superior and lasted longer.

International development organizations need once again to discuss the possibilities for developing manufacturing and industry as a means of providing employment opportunities to address rural poverty and development. Donors have tended to concentrate on micro-level rural solutions to micro-level poverty when the real solutions may not be, and historically have not been, *in situ* at all. Here one is reminded of the statement by Chang (2002) that the development advice offered by donors has tended to follow the motto "do as I say, not as I do".

Privatization of Marketing, Input Supply, and Rural Financial Services

African governments, as purveyors of development in the post-independence era, set up parastatals to provide marketing, input supply, and financial services. This was both a legacy of the colonial period and a reaffirmation of the dominant Keynesian state-centric paradigm. It is true that parastatals did not serve their rural populace well. They tended to take the lion's share of the world market prices, had high administrative costs, supported vested interests, often did not collect perishable commodities on time, and paid farmers late, if at all. Many rural development banks chose their borrowers badly, relied on weak financial intermediaries, had high arrears, eventually went bankrupt, and were closed. Lending also tended to be highly politicized. Most rich farmers often deliberately defaulted, with the collaboration of corrupt bank officials with whom they often shared the loot.

The majority of the poor engaged in rural subsistence agriculture made very small profits. As a result of their absolute and acute poverty, they were compelled to choose between eating and paying back their loans. Both groups had many clever male fide borrowers, whom the state lured in by saying incorrectly that loans to them were free.

The experience of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and Pride Africa in Tanzania gave rise to the somewhat misleading phrase, "the poor are bankable". Consequently, donors pressured African countries' governments to push more and more credit out to poorer and poorer clients, making repayment increasingly improbable.

New trends emerged with the collapse of the USSR. International donors began more critically to assess the performance of the state in many areas. In terms of marketing, rural financial and input supply services, the state received poor marks whether from the standpoint of quality of service delivery, cost effectiveness, or reaching their rural clientele. Instead, it was seen correctly to be wasteful, self-serving, and corrupt. With this new trend came a new paradigm promoting private sector development and a greater emphasis on market forces. In many respects, this new emphasis has been salutary. Most parastatals have been either commercialized or privatized and the few that remain are being forced to compete with the private sector.

Market forces and not state policies have emerged as a new development paradigm championed by donor agencies. This new development has brought along new problems. In the era of state-centric paradigms, rural areas, particularly in Africa, were inundated with government-owned and operated community development banks, cooperative parastatal marketing agencies, and a host of other state organs that provided credit, marketing, and input supply services, even when they were very poorly delivered. Now that government has scaled back or privatized these parastatals, numerous rural areas are bereft of agricultural services. Many banks and private marketing agents have found it too costly and unprofitable to go to remote rural areas where roads are bad, clients are dispersed, and production output is often low and of poor quality. Even when private businessmen go to these places, rural producers often are faced with a monopoly buyer or provider and are just as vulnerable to the exploitation and poor services they experienced in the past (Ariyo and Jerome, 1999).

It is true that, to a certain extent, the goal of withdrawing subsidies for inputs, targeted at eliminating many market distortions in African economies succeeded. However, this withdrawal, accompanied with the devaluation of many African countries' currencies in the 1990s often radically increased the price of inputs. Although agricultural prices for small farmers also have increased with devaluation, the margin of difference is still not necessarily enough to compensate for the high cost of inputs. In addition, even in cases where privatization of services has occurred, the state often still is involved in agriculture and continues to capture a margin of the profits (Creevey, Vengroff and Gaye, 1995; IMF, 1997, 1998).

It is arguable that the post-colonial African state tended to deliver inadequate and unreliable agricultural services to the rural farmers. Presently, the majority of farmers now receive almost no services, and the few that are privileged to receive same do so, far in between. This is a serious problem yet to be solved by donor agencies. They are still basking in the euphoria that the new market paradigm has been successful, as it has been in some cases.

However, currently many farmers have poor access to services, have an output that is barely remunerative, and have few alternative employment opportunities. In the past, when farming became uncompetitive, individuals engaged in remunerative nonfarm activities, or moved to large cities and worked in factories and construction sites. Currently, in most African countries, there is already a mass out-migration of labor, but with little chance of employment either in the rural areas, where they are already marginalized, or in the urban areas where there is great competition for few jobs.

Capacity-Building for Sustainable Development

The word 'capacity' has been elevated in the developmental nexus, thanks to new development paradigms. It is now used widely without any specificity. Donors and others often speak about a 'lack of capacity' to describe a problem or 'capacity-building' as a way of solving it. The question is, what does all of this mean? It is common knowledge institutions that are not performing well can have any number of problems. These include being badly managed, having unqualified staff, having workers who lack incentives because they are poorly paid or otherwise demoralized, not having proper equipment, or being engaged in state-supported or individual corruption. Each of these problems is very different and requires very different solutions.

The 'capacity-building' contraption has been extensively popularized in many discussions on rural development, poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability. Its use has been random, without stating what is meant and proposing solutions that mostly have nothing to do with the real problems, which are rarely spelled out. Routinely, donors choose to modernize equipment and to train staff as a means of improving how organizations function. However, often a lack of equipment and a lack of training, while relatively easily provided as solutions, are not the real problems.

According to the approach popularized by North (1994), it is important, from the onset, to try and understand the formal and informal rules of the game and the incentives and disincentives that support certain types of behaviors. This would help to ground the idea of institution - or capacity - building in some reality. It would do so by specifying the real problem behind badly functioning institutions, while tying ideas about how to strengthen them to specific problems.

Discussions of a lack of access by the poor to social services and the problem of developing a supportive environment for private sector development, to take just two examples, often regress to highly general euphemisms, such as institutional "capacity-building" in proposing solutions. Such euphemisms avoid analyzing situations to the point where they identify specific problems or discuss causal means-ends relationships, indicating whether there are any concrete solutions to the problems identified and, if so, what actions by donor agencies would best support them.

The resultant effect of the above discussion is that many problems experienced by the rural poor in a host of areas—whether health, education, social security, access to land and other services, or poorly functioning institutions that do not serve them—often are found to be political rather than technical. Donor agencies need to acknowledge political impediments as such strategies to promote integrated rural development, address poverty and its related problems, and ensure the maintenance of a sustainable environment.

Conclusion

The analysis in this article has singled out a series of issues, by no means comprehensive, to highlight problems arising from the application of recent development paradigms. The argument is that a number of these new paradigms of rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation raise both conceptual problems and operational difficulties when they are implemented on the field. In some cases, the ideas currently being proposed by donor agencies as solutions bear little relationship to the realities or problems experienced by the rural poor on a daily basis. In other cases, the paradigms themselves are often mythical in their conception, representing desired end states. Hence, when implemented in a dynamic environment, they tend not to work as they conflict with existing realities and are theoretically unsound.

In addition, in all of the paradigms discussed, there is a common tendency to ignore or escape the reality of dealing with the monster in the room—poorly functioning corrupt African governments that contribute to poverty and often destroy rather than promote development. Donor agencies have responded by supporting a plethora of actors nominally outside the state. Often, however, these non-state actors are not independent, and even when they enjoy some degree of independence, they are still subject to the laws, policies, regulatory procedures, and power of the state, an entity that has always been of paramount importance. There is a dangerous tendency to ignore this reality. Historically, the state, either directly or indirectly, has been a critical engine of growth and the purveyor of development, something that cannot be denied.

From a policy perspective, this analysis is intended as a point of departure to generate critical thinking about current approaches to rural development. It is also an attempt to get away from much of the simplistic thinking that has characterized current analysis. While the road ahead may be fraught with difficulties, they must be acknowledged. Current thinking about rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation should dynamically address African countries' problems of development. One of the main barriers to sound inquiry are bad paradigms, and the refusal to engage in hard thinking hard and deal honestly about the very difficult problems of rural development, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation.

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