



Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

30th November 2007

United States of Africa

Essential Vision or Misguided Fantasy?

Introduction & Background

The debate, held on 30th November 2007 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, was co-organised by the Pan-African Development Education and Advocacy Programme (PADEAP) and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD).

The objective of the debate was to discuss the idea of a United States of Africa and thus, provide the participants with an insight into the arguments for and against this idea, the history and progress of such an ambitious project, as well as the challenges facing it.

- Welcome Address: Ms. Tonia Mihill (PADEAP) & Ms. Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell (CDD)
- Chair: Dr. Paul Okojie, School of Law, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Speakers: Mr. Bala Sanusi, Chairman, ADVAD
Dr. Titi Banjoko, Director, Africa Recruit
Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, Africa Director, UN Millennium Campaign

Welcome Address

1. Ms. Tonia Mihill, UK Co-ordinator, PADEAP

Ms. Tonia Mihill began by welcoming everyone on behalf of PADEAP. She then outlined PADEAP's foundation as well as its promotion of sustainable and practical solutions to the challenges of development in

Africa, with a current emphasis on Nigeria and Uganda, and in the Diaspora, through the spreading of information on African issues.

2. Ms. Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell (Coordinator, CDD International Office)

First, Ms. Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell welcomed everyone on behalf of the CDD. Next, she summed up the inception of the CDD in the UK 10 years ago by a group of visionary West Africans in search of an independent space to reflect on the challenges posed by democracy and development in the West African sub-region, and effective solutions to these challenges.

Finally, she cited a research on the reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone recently published by the CDD International Office as an example of the CDD being at the forefront of the fight against the problems facing Africa in general and West Africa in particular.

Presentations

1. Mr. Bala Sanusi, Chairman, African Diaspora Voices for Africa's Development (ADVAD)

A united Africa is, according to Mr. Sanusi, wanted by the overwhelming majority of Africans. There are, however, discrepancies as to when and how this unification should be carried out. Some maintain that it should happen immediately, while others advocate a gradual process. Mr. Sanusi sided with the latter, asserting that such an important matter as the unification of a continent should not be rushed.

He cited the case of the European Union, which started as a common market before becoming a union, a process which is still ongoing five decades later. Furthermore, the existing differences in geology, economy and culture between African Union states demand a cautious progress towards unification.

To contextualise the idea of the unification of Africa, Mr. Sanusi stated that it was most prominently advanced in the 1950s by Nkrumah and Kenyatta.

Unfortunately, the unification of the African continent failed to materialise, mainly because most Africans prioritised the achievement and consolidation of national independence over African unity.

Finally, Mr. Sanusi pointed out that the African Union (AU), the actual organisation, does not even work properly. While a multitude of declarations have been produced over the years, the real unification of Africa has not yet happened. Even the members of the Diaspora, a group recently recognised by the AU as the 6th region of Africa, do not engage properly with the AU, and very few are familiar with its work. Thus a gradual progress towards the unification of Africa, as advocated by figures such as Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Yar'Adua of Nigeria, is the best approach.

2. Dr. Titi Banjoko, Director, Africa Recruit

Dr. Banjoko began by asserting that the idea of the United States of Africa is a vision and thus a dream. While dreams may indeed come true, the notion of the United States of Africa is likely to remain a fantasy for a very long time, if not forever.

Subsequently, Dr. Banjoko set out to discuss the reasons why people advocate the idea of the United States of Africa. Some adhere to the ideals of the AU to build an efficient structure, capable of mobilising human and non-human resources and becoming a dynamic force in the international arena.

Others would like Africans to speak with one voice and believe that such an ambition could be fulfilled only through the unification of Africa. Some others are convinced that unification would enable Africans to tackle better the challenges of globalisation.

Dr. Banjoko acknowledged that an Africa speaking with one voice would inevitably be beneficial for Africans, particularly the citizens of smaller states, who would benefit through trade. But, she wondered whether the advocates of a United States of Africa are pursuing the same thing, and pointed out the

uncertainty surrounding the final form that this united Africa would take. Would it be like the United States of America with each state having its own laws with a common agenda? Or more like a multi-national company? What would the framework be?

Dr. Banjoko subsequently cited economic and external factors as the main reasons for her scepticism towards the idea of the United States of Africa. Without the economic power of Western and Asian countries such as China, Africa would never become a major player in the international arena. Even within Africa, weak states are discriminated by those that are more developed and powerful, just as the poorest European states are discriminated by more prosperous EU countries. Furthermore, the lack of money has so far condemned the African Union to have weak and powerless institutions, and would have exactly the same effect on the United States of Africa should such a structure be created. Moreover, African politicians tend to waste time on useless talks, instead of creating favourable conditions for business people to operate and thus generate the economic prosperity that would enable Africans to fulfil their ambitions.

Africa is currently not free, as it relies heavily on the financial and technological assistance provided by wealthy and powerful non-African states. These rich countries are very likely to oppose the creation of the United States of Africa as a potential competitor, and they would use their economic and political influence to impede the realisation of this dream.

Furthermore, HIV/AIDS, climate change and other challenges facing Africa would render it more dependent on foreigners who, as in the past, would do

anything in their power to keep this continent divided and weak in order to carry on dominating it. As there is no political will on the part of African leaders to either inspire their people by spelling out the exact nature of the United States of Africa and the framework it may have, or take practical steps to boost economic growth throughout Africa by eliminating the micro-economic structures that currently prevail in this continent, the idea of the United States of Africa is likely to remain a misguided fantasy, Dr. Banjoko concluded.

3. Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem

While he began by acknowledging that he now works for the United Nations, Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem insisted that he has always been, and remains, a committed pan-Africanist trying to do his best for Africa. He then replied to the point made earlier by Dr. Banjoko that the idea of the United States of Africa is a dream by stating that we should not be afraid of dreams, as those who do not dream suffer from nightmares.

The issue is not the dream as such, but the need for Africans to mobilise themselves and work hard in order to realise it. Africans have never been passive and resigned to their fate. They fought against slavery and survived it, despite constant claims by supporters of slavery that Africans were born to be slaves and should not dream of freedom.

Equally, Kwame Nkrumah and other colonised Africans studied in the countries of their colonisers who assumed that they were forming lifelong servants, yet these Africans returned home to fight for freedom and change the status quo. These achievements should never be overlooked; instead, they should inspire Africans and remind them that Africa's destiny is not to be ruled by others.

Dr. Abdul-Raheem subsequently called for a united continent from Cape Town to Cairo. He described the EU's Africa strategy and the ways in which the EU puts pressure on the Africans as condescending and reminiscent of the colonial period. Africans should not follow leaders who resist progress and content themselves with being "House Niggers" to Westerners and other powerful foreigners.

Globalisation, Dr. Abdul-Raheem asserted, is similar to imperialism and colonisation; it is only a different kind of exploitation. The colonised of yesterday are today's digital poor. The West's criticisms of China's

lack of human rights are hypocritical, for Westerners themselves have never respected the dignity or human rights of the people subjected to their domination.

As was the case with Western countries, the Chinese are just after Africa's resources, and they are all prioritising their interests over those of the Africans. The world does not, however, owe Africa a living, Africa owes to itself; and Africans should endeavour to snatch victory from the jaws of colonisation. They cannot achieve this by remaining disunited.

Dr. Abdul-Raheem wondered what the benefit of independence under the colonial structure of 54 states is for Africans, and how many are actually relevant in their own affairs, let alone in international affairs. Many African states would not have survived had it not been for the divisive policies of former colonisers, but Africans themselves have never stopped being pan-Africanist.

There are countless examples of no-man's lands all over Africa, where people go from one country into another with total disregard for the artificial frontiers. The challenge of pan-Africanism is to get rid of these illogical and irrelevant barriers that make Africans fight among themselves, and do not serve the interests of the people.

"Freedom," Dr. Abdul-Raheem asserted, "is what you allow yourself." Africans' freedom is restricted in their own land, as they are not allowed to travel freely, although capital can do so. Pan-Africanists should make every endeavour to achieve the unification of Africa, and break up the 54 armies that cannot defend their people, only oppress them.

While he acknowledged the many failings of African leaders, Dr. Abdul-Raheem declared that we should not expect our leaders to be angels, as none of us is.

Instead, each African should ask themselves what they are doing for their continent and for their fellow Africans.

Members of the African Diaspora should also organise themselves and engage the African Union, which has now recognised the Diaspora as a region. Changes in Africa will come less from the leaders than from the impetus of the people.

Dr Abdul-Raheem ended his intervention by rejecting the idea of a gradual progress towards the unification of Africa, asserting that we have already had 50 years of gradualism. Africans should work at every level to strengthen the African Union, make it become more efficient and enable it to achieve its objectives.

Africa is ours and we Africans can either be part of the problem or part of the solution, but we must never surrender to the self-hatred that could either make us disregard our past achievements or think that there are no solutions to our problems. While there are still many challenges facing this organisation, the African Union has made a lot of progress and achieved many positive things.

For example, it has moved from the position of non-interference to non-indifference and, thanks to its stance against coups, the overwhelming majority of African leaders are now elected. Furthermore, the AU is the only multi-lateral organisation with parity between men and women. “Africans,” concluded Dr. Abdul-Raheem, “must think big and unite. If not now, then when?”

Summary of the Discussion Section

Following the presentations by the above speakers, the floor was opened to questions and comments from the audience, which consisted of various academics, representatives from Diaspora-related organisations and other interested persons.

One participant asked Dr. Banjoko if she believed in the United Nations; another asked each speaker to define Pan-Africanism in their own terms so as to put their views in perspective. A Nigerian academic, Dr. Lucky Akaruese of the University of Port Harcourt,

commented that it might be easier to envision an idea of the ‘United States of Africa’ for the members of the Diaspora, but the circumstances of living on the continent produce cynicism.

He also questioned the relevance of Pan-Africanism and Nigeria’s role as a regional power, given the recent flawed elections there, and asserted that Africa must strive to become more competitive, as China is changing the rules of the economic game.

Responses

1. Dr. T Banjoko

Dr. Banjoko responded to the first question about the UN by stating that she does not view it as an efficient organisation and, consequently, has no faith in it. She reiterated her belief that the economic factor is far more important than political considerations, and

stressed that political independence comes after economic independence. She cited China as a case in point, stating that this country is now widely respected because of its economic strength.

2. Mr. Bala Sanusi

In response to the comment about the different ways of viewing the debate depending on whether one is living in Africa or outside the continent, Mr. Sanusi asserted that members of the Diaspora are in Africa everyday in their heart, even if they are not physically there. Many are very well-informed, aware of the challenges facing Africans, and willing to do everything they can to help change things for the

better. He also expressed his disagreement with the view that Nigeria cannot lead the West African sub-region, or even Africa. For while Nigerians still have to overcome many challenges, not least the need to consolidate democracy in their country, they have already made a lot of progress, and they can take the lead in the drive towards the unification of Africa.

3. Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem

Answering the general comments about economics, Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem branded the claim that economics can drive political power a myth. He illustrated this point by referring to Kenya, a country generally viewed as a medium-income state, but which is in fact so unequal that the overwhelming majority of Kenyans live in dire poverty. Without the political will to make most Kenyans benefit from the current macro-level growth, there would be no progress, no genuine economic development and no social cohesion in Kenya. As this is applicable to the entire African continent, Africans cannot afford to educate their children without principles, only economics.

In response to the question about the current relevance of pan-Africanism, Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-

Final Set of Questions

A participant challenged Dr. T. Banjoko, saying that the discussion must be in a wider context, not restricted to economics, for one cannot separate the vision or money from politics. Stating her belief that Africans “must dare to invent a future,” she asked what the speakers’ vision for Africa was.

Ms. Aboa-Bradwell told Dr. Banjoko that while she admired her as an inspiring figure and a great African woman, she felt that her advocacy of economics above politics and vision was misguided. She commented that China was an independent, united political entity long before having contact with Westerners and other potential colonisers, whereas African states, created by foreign colonisers, have yet to achieve genuine independence and build a strong sense of national unity; Africans, therefore, cannot afford to prioritise economics over politics, vision and the fight for genuine independence, and must always remember the words of the late Steve Biko, “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

Finally, she challenged Dr. Abdul-Raheem’s advocacy of an immediately borderless Africa, stating that rather than disappear, the current problems facing Africa would just be magnified.

Raheem stated that the main challenge of pan-Africanism is to galvanise Africans into fighting for the right to determine their own destiny. Currently, the majority of African people are not stakeholders and thus they refer to their governments as ‘the government,’ instead of ‘our government.’ They should become more active in engaging their leaders and striving to change their circumstances. They should combat the “selective efficiency” of their states, as they are unable to provide for their people’s basic needs, but very good at impeding the free movement of Africans across their continent, whereas it is imperative for Africans to stop living in their own continent as tenants.

An attendee said that she believes in the vision of a united Africa and feels that political strength can work towards economic strength. Another participant enquired about the effects of self-hatred, the post-colonial mindset and the brain drain on the progress of the United States of Africa.

A different participant questioned Dr. Banjoko’s binary opposition between economics and politics, saying that a free market is driven by politics. He also enquired what would replace current African states, and wondered whether North African countries would not prefer to belong to a pan-Arabian state rather than a pan-African.

Next, a participant pointed out there is political benefit in entrepreneurs trying to economically empower themselves. Finally, Mr. Toyin Agbetu from Ligali stated that most Africans are pan-Africanist deep down, but they are afraid to admit this because pan-Africanism is perceived as irrelevant nowadays. He asked how pan-Africanism can be rendered relevant and how pan-Africanists can inspire the masses.

Final Responses

1. Mr. Sanusi

Mr. Sanusi stressed that unity is the strength of African people, and reiterated his belief that the unification of Africa should be progressive. For him the priority is to strengthen existing structures and put

in place those still required to enable the Union to work smoothly and efficiently. Finally, he urged the Diaspora to come together to make the United States of Africa a reality.

2. Dr. T. Banjoko

Dr. Banjoko responded to the various questions on her advocacy of economics over politics by asserting that politicians do not attract businessmen and women in Africa because they do not provide a space for businesses. She called for a focus to be put on

micro-enterprise and for creating a space for micro-economics in general. The issue is not making money for oneself, but creating jobs for others and thus bringing prosperity to Africans.

3. Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem

Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem responded to the comments about his advocacy of an immediately borderless Africa by stating that he does not advocate chaos, as there is always the guarantee of an African citizenship. He objects less to the existence of individual states than to the current disempowerment of Africans, and he is convinced that the best way for Africans to overcome this disempowerment is to unite and break the existing barriers that curtail freedom of movement and trade. Such a move would allow all

Africans to live with dignity and enable the growth of a multi-stakeholder society.

In relation to the brain drain, Dr. Abdul-Raheem asserted that there are many organisations led by Africans who are transforming the brain drain into a brain gain. He urged the members of the African Diaspora to organise themselves, build alliances and work together to improve their circumstances as well as those of their people. “There is no substitute for long struggle,” he concluded.

Closing Remarks from the Chair

Dr. Paul Okojie stated that while the speakers and the participants had divergent views in relation to the idea of the United States of Africa, they all shared a longing for a stronger, more prosperous, dynamic and

peaceful Africa. Another Africa is indeed possible, he asserted, the challenge for all Africans is now to work towards it.

This report was compiled by Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell and Liana Brower from the Centre for Democracy and Development.