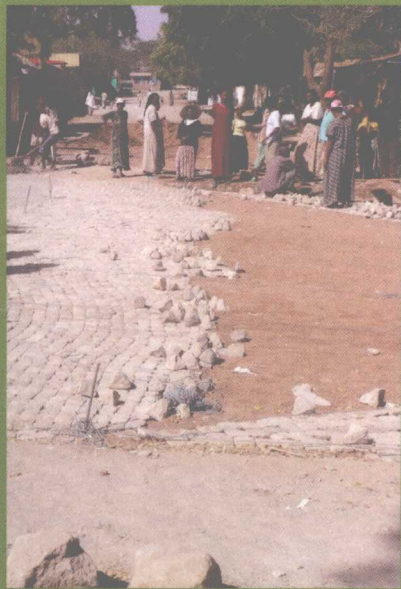


Green Infrastructure for Sustainable Urban Development in Africa



John Abbott

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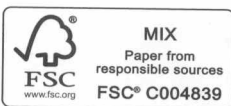
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The failure of western intervention in Africa

Introduction

This book is written on two levels, which will be explored interactively. On one level this is a book about urban infrastructure, and its potential to support a sustainable urban future in the rapidly urbanising countries of sub-Saharan Africa. On a broader level, though, it is a book about the nature of decision-making in development, and ultimately an exploration of how much 'freedom' African countries really have when taking decisions that affect their own development. That African cities (and countries) are underdeveloped is not in question; the real question, which has still not been answered almost fifty years after the majority of African countries achieved independence, is why.

In the first thirty years or so, it was primarily Marxist academics and practitioners who sought to explore this question, and they had a relatively easy task, since the spectre of imperialist hegemony still loomed large in Africa, as did the spectres of both neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism. However, twenty years further on, these arguments about physical and economic domination become ever more difficult to sustain. The condition can no longer be defined solely in terms of a construct based upon the overwhelming power of a dominant economic system. Social concerns are higher up the agenda and the world is more concerned with how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

And yet the niggling doubt persists. Are we really living in a world where African governments are the masters of their own decisions? Is the answer really as simple as abandoning aid in favour of direct foreign investment? On the other hand, if there is some truth in this belief that sub-Saharan Africa has never fully escaped from colonialism, how can this possibly be justified after so long a period? The problem with the Marxist analysis is that it constantly sought to rationalise events primarily within an economic framework, even if this meant adjusting what it saw to fit with what it believed. This is understandable, since it would not be Marxist otherwise; but it can be limiting. But even after Marxism lost its power to

question, it is still economic analysis that dominates the debate, as the book *Dead Aid* by Dambisa Moyo (2009) shows.

There is an alternative view, though. None of us can claim to be totally free from a value system; that is an integral part of what it means to be human. In this case – and it is important to say this upfront – the ideas and beliefs that underpin this book derive from a value system embedded in the teaching of Keir Hardie, the great Scottish social reformer, whose work provided the moral framework and the social bedrock of our household when I was a child.

That does not imply a socialist perspective, as many might immediately conclude. Such a term is, in any case, fairly meaningless in the world of the twenty-first century, regardless of whether one regrets, or rejoices in, its passing. What it does imply is that the focus of the analysis lies within the social sphere, rather than the economic arena. So while this background does carry its own ‘baggage’, it at least allows an exploration of the wider development arena outside the confines of a dominating economic construct, and this has enabled an intellectual freedom of thought which, it is hoped, will enable this book to take a different approach to African urban development from those written previously.

Why infrastructure?

The subtext of the book, as is reflected in its title, is urban governance, with a specific focus on infrastructure governance. But governance cannot be separated from the development process (though it often is); hence, it is that process which is central to the study. Ultimately, the objective, as indicated at the beginning, is the creation of a sustainable urban infrastructure base that can provide the foundation for ongoing development, and a basis for sound and effective governance.

At first glance, while urban infrastructure may appear to be an unusual perspective from which to explore wider socio-political issues, it does have its own rationality. First, the failure to provide urban infrastructure is one of the great development failures of the twentieth century, not only in sub-Saharan Africa but in many other developing countries. And yet to date, none of the arguments for this failure, be they rapid urban growth, low income levels or high costs, are fully convincing. So, there has to be another answer, which then begs the question as to whether we are looking at infrastructure in the right way.

Obviously this is not a simple issue. Management and operational capacity constraints are clearly critical issues, and have a role to play, but they are not the core issue. It has then been proposed that what we are dealing with here is a lack of political will on the part of African leaders, a view that UN-Habitat (2008) puts forward when discussing the failure of countries in Africa to decentralise. Again perhaps a possibility; but this too

is questionable, given that the failure is widespread across so many diverse countries.

There is, however, another option, namely that the failure is linked to external interventions. This argument has been discredited to some degree by the ideological dimension of this position, which has generally been situated within an economic discourse. Yet there is a need to look at the role of external actors much more critically than has been done to date. In doing this, however, we need to start from a clearly stated position, which is a recognition that we are no longer dealing with an exploitative development scenario here, regardless of whether or not this was the case under colonialism. On the contrary, it has to be assumed that the majority of those working in the field of development (speaking now specifically of external actors) are well intentioned, knowledgeable, at least within their own specialisations, and genuinely believe they have something to contribute to the development process in Africa.

Finally, we have a third option, which asks the question: what if there is simply too much external input? This debate, to the extent that it exists, tends to focus on the oppressive impact of aid. This has been a recurring theme in the literature on development, going back to the early 1970s,¹ when the focus was primarily political and linked to aid as a tool of imperialism, and continuing to the present time,² sometimes with the same focus, sometimes with a different one, yet always strongly passionate – as, of course, are those in the opposite camp who argue the benefits of aid. This polarised, and again often ideological, to and fro sees aid in a direct causal relationship with an outcome, which is either negative or positive depending upon the author you read; yet the debate is still no nearer to a solution now than it was when it began forty years earlier.

So, perhaps the time has come to start looking at this question of external involvement from a different perspective. In keeping with the social reference framework used here, the idea is that, instead of discussing aid per se, we should rather explore the potential for oppression (interpreted here in the sense of suffocation, not exploitation) caused through the sheer weight of external cultural and intellectual involvement.

This last point is the least explored of the three perspectives, yet perhaps the most important, though I would suggest that what we are looking at in practice is some combination of all of them. The challenge is to understand the interplay between them, and in this context infrastructure provides an ideal framework within which to explore the issue. And we do need new ideas. For if there is one thing that we can say, and this is as good a point to begin the discussion as any, is while the past fifty years have seen a continuous shift in external approaches to urban development practice, in an attempt to address this failure, none of them has, to date, proved blindingly successful.

Throughout all this time, though, there has been one inexorable trend in urban infrastructure, which is the steady, but continuous, decline in the 'level of service' provided to urban residents – and in particular to the politically weak group in society known as the 'urban poor'. This has now reached a point, with the 'basic needs' approach to service delivery, epitomised by the MDGs, where the level of infrastructure service aimed for has reached the bottom – the absolute minimum – and can go no lower; yet even this minimum target cannot be achieved. Why? Nobody actually knows. However, we can question the external response, which is to throw ever greater sums of money towards paying ever greater numbers of external western 'consultants' and new specialist 'delivery agencies' in order to meet moving targets. Surely the time has come to recognise that there is a much more fundamental malaise involved here, and the only way to address this issue in any meaningful way is to stop throwing money at 'solutions' aimed at addressing the symptoms, and instead return to the root of the problem and find the real cause.

What is needed here is a complete rethink of the way in which urban society functions, particularly a society where the majority of the residents are poor. In that context a rethink about the role of urban infrastructure in sub-Saharan Africa, and associated delivery processes, is not only essential, but central to the discussion. Unfortunately, we still live with a mindset about urban infrastructure that was created in the nineteenth century for a world that was completely different from the one we now live in. Sub-Saharan Africa of the twenty-first century is a quite different place as compared with Britain in the nineteenth.

A second reason why infrastructure should be seen as a basis for African development relates to the symbiotic relationship that exists between infrastructure, the social construct of an urban society, and the physical environment. Before the Reagan–Thatcher economic reforms of the 1980s, urban infrastructure was grounded largely in a social development construct. The degree may have differed, with America, not surprisingly, having a more dominant economic focus; yet even there the social context existed, as embodied by the American concept of 'public works'. This means that underpinning the provision of urban infrastructure to the rich countries of the world in the twentieth century was the principle not simply of social improvement but also of social equity – a principle that is far more crucial to political and social stability in Africa than the economic principle that has replaced it: affordability.

Thus, infrastructure is about far more than technology; that is only the physical manifestation. Rather, infrastructure is an integral part of the social and cultural framework of an urban society. So, it is to that framework that we must look first to initiate change and develop a new approach. Such a rethink would need to be broad in scope, involving not only a new approach to the social, economic and political framework that

underpins urban development, but also, and perhaps more importantly, an exploration of the external intellectual forces that shape that framework. It is to this last issue that we must turn first, to begin our analysis, if we are to reach an understanding of the wider canvas upon which urban development plays itself out.

Who really controls African development?

On a superficial level, the determinants that have led to the current urban conditions which prevail throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa are relatively straightforward: inappropriate policies and ineffective implementation strategies result in poor decision-making which leads to failed outcomes. How easy it is, for those looking in from the outside, particularly in the western countries, to blame this on weak leadership, or corruption, or simply mismanagement by African governments. This book will argue that not only is this far too simplistic an answer but, more worryingly, it is grossly unfair and inaccurate. To get to the heart of this failure we need to delve much deeper, and explore one central, albeit quite complex, question, which is: *who really made the decisions that led to the current urban condition?* Or, phrased slightly differently, *where did the ideas come from that failed repeatedly, time after time?* And the heart of this central question is not: who makes the decisions; but rather: who decides who makes the decisions; and who actually decides what decisions will be made, where they will be made, and how they will be made? The real issue is not who decides – the answer to that is fairly straightforward; the real question is who decides who decides, and that is far more complex. Whatever the answer, this book would argue that one thing is clear: wherever the location for the decisions about exactly what decisions African countries can take may be situated, it is certainly not in the capital cities of sub-Saharan Africa.

Those Marxist analysts of old, looking at colonial history, highlighted a critically important issue, namely that colonial oppression was as much an oppression of the culture as it was military dominance and economic exploitation; yet they failed to follow the exploration of this strand of colonial oppression through to its logical outcome. The reason for that failure, of course, is that Marxism, while recognising the greater oppression, always returns to its (perceived) roots in economic oppression, and in doing so misses the deeper and more insidious oppression of the colonised countries, which is, on the one hand, not simply the oppression of the cultural space, but also, on the other hand, and less well documented, the domination of the wider intellectual space.

The nineteenth century was the industrial age, when mechanics ruled and the perceived future was one driven by technology for the benefit of society. And we have to acknowledge that many Africans also bought into the technological dream. Now, though, as we view it only 150 years later,

we can see that this advance came at a huge cost. It was not only an accumulation of wealth that was occurring through industrialisation; it was a theft of resources, perhaps unintended but no less a theft for that, coupled with a transfer of the true exploitation cost of industrialisation elsewhere, in the form of an ever-growing debt burden. And the bank that had to carry this burden of debt was the biosphere. That of course is the core of the climate change debate with regard to carbon output. The real issue is not how much carbon different countries discharge to the atmosphere now; the question is how do we allocate a cost to the benefit gained from adding all that carbon to the atmosphere previously?

This issue of carbon discharge was not, of course, recognised at the time. The technologies developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were based upon an open-ended supply of resources and, equally important, a boundless space in which to discharge the waste. That model is now coming up against the reality of the earth as a closed system. Yet we cannot simply blame technology for our present impasse, though we will need to seriously change our view of, and approach towards, technology. The first step is to go broader, to assess the nature of the system that operates the technology.

In an article entitled 'All Cultures Are Not Equal', Kenan Malik³ (2002) quotes a statement by the Marxist writer and theorist C. L. R. James as follows: 'I denounce European colonialism. ... But I respect the learning and profound discoveries of Western civilisation' (James, 1980, p. 179). Malik then goes on to say:

James was one of the great radicals of the twentieth century, an anti-imperialist, a superb historian of black struggles, a Marxist who remained one even when it was no longer fashionable to be so. But today, James' defence of 'Western civilisation' would probably be dismissed as Eurocentric, even racist.

This analysis by Malik provides the key, with the use of the word 'civilisation', but previously we have tried it in the wrong locks. As a result, we have been forced back on clichés, such as neo-colonialism or neo-liberalism, to try to explain what lay behind the unopened door. Much more telling, when it comes to exploring how a colonising race first obtains, and then retains, dominance over other societies, is the exploration by the historian Peter Berresford Ellis of how the Romans defined their relationship with the least well known of their serious antagonists in their early development phase: the Celts. Speaking about this relationship in the context of the Druids – the 'Celtic intelligentsia' – he writes:

The early surviving sources about the Druids are written in support of Rome and its conquest of the Celts and suppression of the Druids. In