

Globalization, Independent Media and Development in Africa

Theatre of the Strong and Mighty!

I think it would be wise for us to first look into the following words that will today dominate this entire presentation—globalization, development and independent media. It is not necessary go into a dictionary definition of what these words mean because we are all familiar with their literary meaning. What should interest us at this stage of global conflict is what they mean to our brothers in Africa, who have only recently been trying to understand what these words means to them. To have a better presentation for the purpose of this paper, I will be using Nigeria as a case study, but with some few references to other parts of Africa.

Globalization to an average African is simply *neo-colonialism*—a system that completely took effect with no consultation with African people, a second kind of colonialism that completely neglects people's welfare and promotes corporate business and profit alone. A local African man sees no difference between economic globalization, neo-colonialism and globalization in its entirety. He believes that the word globalization is a fraud and that the only word that exists genuinely is "economic globalization," which is the very foundation of the new world colonialism (neo-colonialism). He is always faced with a re-echoing question—if globalization is true, real and developed for even global development, why should people's welfare, health, education, technology etc be promoted and subsidized in the North (Europe and America), while at same time in the same globe, where globalization is believed to be bridging gaps, others like Africans are being made to suffer from debt, poverty, environmental degradation, famine, corruption etc. induced on them by trans-national corporations and their economic globalization propellers. The growth of Africa we know is in the hands of Africans, but wouldn't it be wise to allow Africa an opportunity to grow?

Development in Africa means sustainability and even distribution of proceeds. Most development in Africa that forms the historic achievement of the continent is localized and not influenced by foreign bodies. It is development that stood the test of time worldwide. The Binis in Nigeria are known for their wonderful works of art, which have sold globally to date because of their uniqueness in the market. Egypt still lives on its past glory as one of the countries where civilization started.

Traditional Africa believes that the *media* (journalists) are messengers of truth. But this has been eroded over time by the birth of economic globalization—a system that utilizes the media as a tool to sell its deceitful policies and activities. In recorded history, no journalist has been killed in any traditional African community since they are special people who only tell the truth and bring home enough respect for doing so. Neo-colonialism (globalization) is believed to have instituted a corrupt foundation upon which African leaders and rulers corrupt our local media and in turn utilize them for the attainment of the policies and objectives in favor of their profit-driven interests. Violation of human rights, killing of journalists and other media corruption practices have recently been traced to the triumphant entry of globalization-propelling multi-national institutions and their government allies into Africa.

Globalization and African Development

Africa can be said to have been on the right course of development before the advent of globalization. We believed in our own structured development and had a direction. It is presently noted that African development has been completely distorted by the strong fist of economic globalization. It is most difficult to say that globalization exists in abstract because present studies and events have completely unmasked the faces behind globalization. Globalization and its retarding effect on African development cannot be discussed in the present-day world without mentioning names like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). They have most recently been identified as the major propellers of neo-colonialism for their initiators through money lending, development initiatives and free trade propaganda. For most African countries who had made the long and tortuous journey to independence, the euphoria that political freedom automatically leads to economic prosperity is increasingly giving way to a grim reality, as western powers contrive diabolical means to hold the African continent down. The IMF is particularly implementing this imperialist agenda under many guises, including foreign debt burden and spurious reform programs anchored on the removal of subsidies from essential sectors of human life. The debt burden particularly has become a vicious circle structured to perpetuate economic misery despite the caliber of experts that implement government policies. Across the African continent, the impact of the IMF and World Bank is having a hard impact on the continuous existence of the region. Their policies have completely destroyed our economy, health system, water supply, and other basic essentials for living.

Over the past two decades, the World Bank and IMF have undermined Africa's health through the policies they have imposed. The dependence of poor and highly indebted African countries on World Bank and IMF loans has given these institutions leverage to control economic policymaking in these countries. The policies mandated by the World Bank and IMF has forced African governments to orient their economies towards greater integration in international markets at the expense of social services and long-term development priorities. They have reduced the role of the state and cut back government expenditure.

The story the IMF, WB etc present in Africa is no longer new in international discussions. We all know how the World Bank and IMF were created at the Breton Woods Conference in New Hampshire, U.S.A. in 1944. They were designed as pillars of the postwar global economic order. The World Bank's focus is the provision of long-term loans to support development projects and programs. The IMF concentrates on providing loans to stabilize countries with short-term financial crises. The World Bank and IMF became increasingly powerful in Africa with the economic crisis of the early 1980s. In the late 1970s, rising oil prices, rising interest rates, and falling prices for other primary commodities left many poor African countries unable to repay mounting foreign debts. In the early 1980s, Africa's debt crisis worsened. The ratio of its foreign debt to its export income grew to 500 per cent.¹ African countries needed increasing amounts of "hard currency" to repay their external debts (i.e. convertible foreign currencies such as dollars and deutschmarks). But their share of world trade was decreasing and their export earnings dropped as global prices for primary commodities fell. The reliance of many African countries on imports of manufactured goods, which they themselves did not produce, left them importing more while they exported less. Their balance of payments problems worsened and their foreign debt burdens became unsustainable.

African governments needed new loans to pay their outstanding debts and to meet critical domestic needs. The World Bank and IMF became key providers of loans to countries that were unable to borrow elsewhere. They took over from wealthy governments and private banks as the main source of loans for poor countries. These institutions provided "hard currency" loans to African countries to insure repayment of their external debts and to restore economic stability. Not surprisingly, the governments of the world's richest countries direct the World Bank and IMF. Combined, the "Group of 7" (U.S., Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan) hold more than 40 per cent of the votes on the Boards of Directors of these institutions. The U.S. alone accounts for almost 20 per cent.²

The impact of the IMF and the World Bank on African development is currently an impediment to most Africa countries' development, even those that finally made it to democracy. Nigeria is one such country whose development and good governance are currently being retarded. The most industrialized countries in the world have actually developed under conditions opposite to those imposed by the World Bank and IMF on African governments. The U.S. and the countries of Western Europe accorded a central role to the state in economic activity, and practiced strong protectionism, with subsidies for domestic industries. Under World Bank and IMF programs, African countries have been forced to cut back or abandon the very provisions that helped rich countries grow and prosper in the past.

According to a *Newswatch* publication in *Global Policy* of May 8, 2002, Nigeria's Minister of Finance Adamu Ciroma released a statement on the amount of Nigeria's debt. Among other things, he said:

In 1984 our indebtedness to the IMF was only US\$5.5 billion. From that time to date we paid US\$17.5 billion as interest. If you fail to pay such interest, you will be surcharged; so much of the payments we make go for interest payment; not the principal. But up till now, the outstanding debt stock remains at US\$28 billion.³

This crooked system of compound interest is indeed a fraud being perpetrated on the toiling masses. Those who think otherwise should hear the minister: "The IMF adopted this strategy so that no third world nation would be out of debt. Their plan is that all countries should have a permanent debt, which is unfair."

Such outcry has also been sounded by other notable voices. At the just-concluded international conference on financing for development held in Monterrey, Mexico, President Olusegun Obasanjo gave vent to his frustration over Nigeria's debt problem. He lamented that in the past three years, Nigeria has had to spend US\$5 billion in servicing its foreign debts, even though the same debts had been repaid two times over. It is indeed heartbreaking to hear that after repaying a debt two times over, the record still shows an amount three times more than the principal. There is nothing more dishonest than saying that one times two is equal to minus three. Whatever arrangement produces such a state of affairs is unconscionable, cruel and unjust. The debt burden may be legal but, in light of the increasing gap between law and justice, morality should step into the picture.

The fact that we have repaid the debt two times over could provide moral high ground and a rallying point to build an international coalition against this modern slavery. When one compares the favorable terms availed to other regions, the shackles of foreign debt, this sword of Damocles hanging over Africa, becomes shock-

ing and shamefully racist. The world of international finance stinks to high heaven, replete with a double standard and accentuated by racism.

It goes without saying that given the same or relatively better credit terms, African countries will surely do well in fighting the ravages of poverty, illiteracy and diseases. But do the international mothers and fathers wish Africa well? For this reason African economies increasingly regress and nobody really comprehends. The more Africa plays according to the global rules to uplift itself, the more some invisible forces seem to negate everything. Africa deserves a breathing space. It does not serve the interest of humanity to suppress Africa to the status of a scavenger feeding on the rancid crumbs of the global economy. Africa deserves a seat at the table of prosperity. The continuation of the present unfair treatment means Africa will forever remain in the doldrums with little prospect of becoming a partner in global affairs. To abandon all claims to these spurious debts is the least developed countries can and should do. They cannot continue to unleash forces that promote poverty while at the same time preaching democracy and human rights.

At this junction it would be wise to bring to your attention the fact that the African press has not been straightforward in reporting issues surrounding the operations of the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization. Debt issues often never made it into the pages of the papers or reached the desk of mainstream media. This is because the African press has been bought, and those that refuse collecting their proceeds from the sales either get killed or imprisoned for as long as they refuse.

The Media and Development in Africa

The African media could be said to be in chains and under the control of world powers and their collaborators (the Africa leaders and multinationals corporations). At different times they have served as an instrument readily available to influence decisions and pass false information to civil society, though they have also been useful in the enthronement of democracy in Africa. They could be said to have been retarding the pace of African development, since they have always put profit, greed and self-enrichment before the mandate and trust they owe to the masses. The African press could be regarded as the cheapest and most favorably priced press in the world. They plug and unplug who and what they want.

Plugging and unplugging business in the media world is also not free of hazard. For instance, the Nigerian press, which is over 137 years old and one of the most outspoken in Africa, was nurtured within a political culture that tolerated dissent. However, the flourishing of the media in the two decades following independence in 1960 was slowly inhibited by successive military regimes. The presidential elections of June 12, 1993 proved to be a key turning point in the regime's relations with the media. Even though the civilian candidate, Moshood Abiola, had by all accounts won, the military rulers cancelled the results. Widespread demonstrations and revolts erupted throughout Nigeria, along with a crackdown on the media.

Since that time, many independent journalists have had to work underground and circulate newspapers surreptitiously, all the while trying to evade the seemingly omnipresent police. Statistics on press freedom violations in 1993 in Nigeria bear witness to this state of affairs: roughly 300,000 copies of publications were seized, 17 titles were banned, 54 journalists were arrested, and another 20 summoned to appear in court. Indeed, the current regime headed by General Sani Abacha, who seized power in a bloodless coup in November 1993, has several ways of ensuring dissenting voices

in the media are muzzled. State Security Service agents are routinely dispatched to obstruct the distribution of newspapers by either raiding the newspapers' offices or confiscating them directly at newsstands. In addition, street vendors have been threatened, arrested, and taken to court for selling the offending publications. More subtly, the regime has resorted to putting counterfeit editions of opposition newspapers into circulation. Identical in appearance at first glance, the papers actually sing the praises of the regime and are meant to confuse readers.

A more traditional method of subduing the media is through arrests and detentions. Countless journalists have suffered this fate and many have been imprisoned for months on end. For those who succeed in going into hiding, authorities do not hesitate to imprison their spouses—who often are raising families—so that the journalist is compelled to resurface. The most egregious recent incident against the media occurred when four journalists were each given life sentences in 1995, later commuted to 15 years, for allegedly plotting to overthrow General Abacha. The four—George Mbah, deputy editor of *Tell*; Ben Charles Obi, editor of *Weekend Classique*; Kunle Ajibade, editor of *The News*; and Christine Anyanwu, editor of *The Sunday Magazine*—were tried in camera in a military court before dozens of Nigerian army officers, and were convicted on extremely dubious charges. In addition to such blatant attacks, the regime has lately attempted to legislate its harassment and censorship of the media. In January 1997, the information minister announced plans to set up a press court that would try journalists who “report untruths” and which would enforce Decree 43. Issued in 1993, the decree sets down stringent requirements for newspapers wishing to apply for publishing licenses, including that of forcing newspapers to renew their license annually. Failure to abide by the regulations could result in heavy fines or imprisonment for up to seven years. It is apparent that General Abacha considers the media to be an enemy of the state. But as pessimistic as the situation may be, human rights advocate and media lawyer Chief Gani Fawehinmi points to the fact that there are independent journalists who risk their lives to tell the truth, and that “if there are still newspapers in this country, it is not because the press is free but because it is courageous.” But over the years things have started assuming a new shape. With the introduction of information technology into the media and its current presence in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, media works are not getting tougher and better. Independent media are now seeking alternatives to the usual age-old method of getting news out via paper prints. They now use Internet as a tool to reach out.

According to James Oatway, with “Nigeria’s history of press freedom violations and oppression, the advent of the Internet has provided a medium that can’t be censored, banned or confiscated. This means that the press can use the Internet to publish news and editorials relatively safe from government interference. This is probably one of the most important functions of the Internet in Africa at the moment.”⁴ At the moment Nigeria has one of the most advanced Internet frameworks in Africa. The Internet in Nigeria first started to be discussed publicly in 1995. Workshops and other gatherings were set up by what is known today as the Nigerian Internet Group (NIG).

Another issue that’s worth going into about Africa media is that despite the introduction of the Internet into African media, there is still no real flow of unguarded news—freedom of expression. Most independent media that could afford having a space on the Internet are still within the hammers of the government. Their Internet news reports are always copies of what they have in their normal daily print which is a complete expression of their usual news but with opportunity to reach

wider audience via the net. This issue currently calls for an alternative media where people can have access to express their mind, views and beliefs without being censored by editors and media owners who earn their living by registering as an independent media pretending to be concerned about the people but working for the government in disguise. There are millions of cases in which accurate news and people's complaints/opinions never made it to the pages and desks of mainstream media. Hence, the birth of an alternative independent media—The Nigeria Independent Media Centre www.nigeria.indymedia.org.

Nigeria IMC is a part of the global Independent Media www.indymedia.org started in the last quarters of 2001 to bridge the gap left by independent and government media. It utilizes the power of the Internet, radio and print. The project completely empowers the local Nigerian and African people by giving them opportunities to publish their news without being edited, delayed or passed through the bottleneck policies of mainstream media. It operates according to non-hierarchical management and collective consensus decision-making processes which completely break with all forms and manners of bureaucratic structures that hinder a free press. The indymedia project currently exists in three Africa countries with more still in the process of being approved.

A Better Media ... a Better Africa

At this point, it is very evident that Africa needs nothing more than a better and more democratic media system for its growth and development. The current structure of independent and government-owned media cannot usher in a well-informed African continent ready to take the lead in the world of developed countries. It is also clear, though, that African media have contributed to the development of the region, but have also done much harm to the dilapidated condition of the region by selling the peoples rights for plate of meal. Their negligence and outright compromise in reporting news related to development, governance, debt and human right violations have kept Africa in the dark. Only an African press genuinely committed to the freedom of the media, respect for human rights, respect for people's welfare and development can bridge the gap and sail Africa to the much desired promise land. A Better Media. A Better Africa.

1 Kevin Watkins et al, *The Oxfam Poverty Report* (Oxford, 1995), p. 74.

2 The U.S. holds 16.45 per cent of the votes at the World Bank, and over 17 per cent of the votes at the International Monetary Fund.

3 One world double standard; newswatch publication, in social/economic policy, 8th may, 2002. www.globalpolicy.org/socecon.index/html

4 Oatway, James, *The Internet*, journ.ru.ac.za/amd/webnig.htm