

NEPAD: An African Spirit for Renewal

Ten Years Old: The Plan Scores Some Gains, Faces Key Tests

An interview with Richard Mkandawire, Ph.D.
NEPAD Director of Partnerships, Resource Mobilization and Communications

by
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Richard Mkandawire, Ph.D. (photo by Ernest Harsch)

The following interview is from *Africa Renewal*, (www.un.org/africarenewal) August 2011, pages 27-29, created by the Africa Section of the Strategic Communications Division in the Department of Public Information at the United Nations in New York, with Masimba Tafirenyika as editor-in-chief and Ernest Harsch as managing editor. In 2001, African leaders officially adopted the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) as the continent's premier framework for economic, social and political advancement. With the plan's 10th anniversary approaching, Africa Renewal's managing editor, Ernest Harsch, visited the offices of the NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency in Midrand, South Africa, and spoke with Richard Mkandawire, its director of partnerships, resource mobilization and communications.

Introduction

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was officially adopted at a July 2001 summit meeting of African heads of state. The regional plan expressed the determination of Africa's people "to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalizing world." It called for a new relationship between Africa and the international community in which the non-African partners would seek to complement the region's own efforts. The United Nations, the major industrialized nations and various donor agencies pledged to extend their support.

While much time was initially spent in setting up ad hoc institutional arrangements for NEPAD and explaining its goals and principles to both African and international audiences, the plan also registered a number of accomplishments during its first decade. These have included:

- The establishment of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), by which African governments voluntarily agree to allow their political, human rights and economic policy performance to be scrutinized by panels of prominent Africans. Thirty African countries had joined the APRM as of January 2011, with 14 of them having completed a full peer review.
- The elaboration of the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), designed to help African governments, farmers and businesspeople better plan and coordinate efforts to promote agricultural productivity and food security, in an environmentally sustainable way. By May 2011, 26 African governments had signed CAADP "compacts" committing them to increase agricultural investments (see *African Renewal*, April 2011).
- The start of construction of an underwater fibre-optic cable (Uhurunet) off Africa's coasts to better connect its information and communications lines to the rest of the world, as well as a cross-border land network (Umojanet) to improve connectivity among African countries.
- A variety of projects to strengthen road networks and electricity grids among African countries, to help improve regional trade and cooperation.

During 2010, NEPAD's structures became more fully integrated into the institutions of the African Union. That year, the former NEPAD Secretariat was replaced by the new NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency, headquartered in South Africa. Its chief executive is Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, of Niger.

Ernest Harsch Interviews Richard Mkandawire

Ten years after the New Partnership for Africa's Development was launched, how do you see its first decade?

NEPAD was a remarkable vision by African leaders. The past 10 years have provided increased confidence and hope about what is actually achievable in Africa. There has been a demonstration of resilience, with Africa leapfrogging onto a viable development path, alongside China — the so-called dragon economy — India and others. One senses a momentum that has been re-energized by NEPAD.

There have not been too many development frameworks that have lived as long as NEPAD — 10 years is quite remarkable. NEPAD is an African spirit for renewal, which will genuinely transform African economies. On the security front, we have never seen such a momentum [towards peace]. There is an increased commitment by African leaders to direct resources to their private sectors.

Our leaders' engagements with the Group of Eight and other global leaders have clearly shown that the international community is beginning to listen and respond to African-driven development priorities. Of course, the international community could have done better in terms of commitment and financing, but there is a response emerging.

African civil society groups and the media often ask: Where are the tangible results?

Agreed. A lot of people would like to see the impact on the ground. But let's not forget that planning is as important as impact. Look at China. It took decades to plan and the results are coming only now. Planning is critical. And if you look at the qualitative aspects of the planning process in Africa, there is increased sensitivity to the NEPAD vision of good governance, transparency and accountability. We have come a long way from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when civil society organizations had no say in the management of the affairs of the state.

We now see critical voices coming from civil society organizations. Things are much more open. There are literally thousands of civil society organizations on the ground, making major contributions towards the national debates on development, on democracy, on good governance.

You mention civil society engagement nationally. What about avenues for civil society input into NEPAD priorities at the continental level?

We are working on structures focused on civil society organizations, to see how best to begin to engage them on a continental level. A very good example is our facilitation work with the African Union Commission on a continental programme of farmers' organizations. This enables farmers' organizations to begin to share their experiences.

It serves as a platform for mutual learning and peer reviewing. They engage their own constituencies, and we are hoping that this continental platform can also be a conduit for channelling ideas to African leaders, for example on facilitating regional markets. But obviously we need to do more, by looking at other civil society organizations than just in agriculture.

We hope we can play a key role in modernizing civil society. The future drivers of reforms in Africa will be civil society organizations. They have the capacity to engage governments, to ensure that governments become accountable to their citizens around a whole range of issues. Providing them with additional capacities will be an important priority.

Last year NEPAD held a transport and infrastructure summit, and at the UN General Assembly's review of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) we often heard African leaders emphasize the importance of infrastructure. How important is infrastructure in NEPAD's agenda?

African leaders are absolutely clear that infrastructure development is a priority, alongside agriculture, education, health and so forth, indeed, alongside all the MDGs. Infrastructure is an area that will fast-track regional integration, connecting people across borders. But it will also connect rural communities with urban areas and ensure that food flows from remote corners of a countryside into urban areas. It will ensure that local communities have access to health services, so that people are able to go to hospitals within a short space of time. African leaders have agreed that they will champion increased financing of infrastructure initiatives, including for energy, which is in such short supply in Africa, despite huge available natural resources and huge hydroelectric potential.

And the financing cannot just be from public sources, but must also come from the private sector?

The future growth of national African economies will be driven by the increased participation of the private sector. Equally important will be strengthening public-private partnerships, not just with the African private sector but also with the international private sector. Increasingly we are seeing that Africa is emerging as a destination for future investments by the international community. In the area of agriculture, Africa is one place which has a surplus of productive land. We are seeing interest in natural resources, whether it's oil or gas or other mineral products. The return on investments is much higher in Africa than anywhere else in the world. The challenge is ensuring that our national governments create a conducive environment for the private sector to thrive.

If we look at foreign investment flows to Africa, there's a clear preference for mining and oil, rather than agriculture and other sectors that may create more jobs. What can African governments do to attract more investments to non-mineral sectors?

National governments in Africa will need to provide incentives to investors so that they can create more job opportunities and their investments will spill over to the wider society. Africa has missed out by allowing the development of the extractive industries at the expense of industries that generate employment, whether agriculture or manufacturing or other industries. Africa must expand its industrial base by ensuring that investors move into value addition to create more jobs, to generate growth and to develop new sets of skills for Africans.

Initially it often seemed that NEPAD was pitched to the Group of Eight and other donors, with expectations of higher aid flows. And although several G8 summits did pledge to increase aid, the global economic crash of 2008 further hampered that effort. Was that a wake-up call for Africa?

Within Africa there is recognition that development will not occur simply by relying on external donor support. Africa will need to mobilize its own domestic resources to develop itself. Africa has demonstrated that it has the capacity to generate its own resources. It will need to tend to issues of efficiency and effectiveness, to how the available resources within Africa are utilized. That may mean increasing capacity in the financial sector, improving fiscal policies and a whole range of other steps. Yes, global support is important, but so is what Africa can generate from within.

When NEPAD was launched, the main global forum on economic issues was the G8. Now there is the Group of 20, with China, India, Brazil, South Africa and others from the South participating. Is this shift giving Africa a stronger voice?

The global architecture on development is changing, and the G20 exemplifies the very fast change, with new players coming in to assert themselves more forcefully on global issues. Africa needs to find increased space within this new architecture, especially the G20, to ensure that its voice is properly represented and that the diversities of the African continent are taken into account. This is part of the debate which the African Union will need to advance.