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# **Democracy, Sustainable Development and Poverty Are They Compatible?**

*Lloyd M. Sachikonye*

## **1. Introduction**

Different regions of the world have taken different paths to democracy and economic development. For some, industrialisation and economic development stretched over several centuries before democracy was installed. For others, rapid economic development was accompanied by authoritarianism which grudgingly conceded to democratisation only in the closing decades of the 20th century. In yet other regions, the socialist path was taken and while there was an initial burst of economic growth in the first half of the 20th century, it was a growth which subsequently stalled, thus proving unsustainable in the context of authoritarianism. The countries which developed the economic base first, before the pressure for democratisation began in earnest, include most democracies in the West. Most East Asian countries vigorously pursued economic growth while putting a lid on demands for democracy during the first seven decades of the 20th century. There was a mixed picture in Latin America, but much of the late democratisation which has occurred followed, rather than preceded, economic development albeit it was weaker than in East Asia.

Much of Africa was under colonialism during the first half of the 20th century, with most countries gaining independence from 1960 onwards. The continent experienced both little economic development and a lack of democracy until independence. It therefore faced a double challenge at independence (which arrived at different times for different countries). The newly independent states needed to respond to demands both for democratisation as well as for economic growth. There would be no trade-off between these simultaneous demands, nor would the countries

have centuries or many decades in which to conveniently sequence the strident expectations from their citizens for democracy and sustainable development. This constituted a profound dilemma for the economically and politically weak new states. Nearly half a century later, most of them are still trying to grapple with the double burden of achieving sustainable growth and building democracy in unfavourable conditions.

This paper seeks to address the question of whether democracy, sustainable development and poverty are compatible in the African context. In view of the varied historical experiences and trajectories alluded to above, what chances exist for Africa to accomplish what took different time-spans and a mix of strategies to achieve economic development as well as consolidate democracy elsewhere? The paper begins by outlining the enormity of the simultaneous challenges facing the continent, and then proceeds to assess the various conceptual, if not the ideological, positions which have been taken to explain the dilemma constituted by these challenges. The last part of the paper attempts a provisional synthesis.

## **2. Elements of the African Dilemma**

Prior to providing an overview of trends in democracy, sustainable development and poverty, it is necessary to define briefly what we understand by these somewhat overused terms. Democracy has often been used to denote a system of rule based on free and fair elections, the rule of law and the protection of individual freedoms and rights. It is characterised by power-sharing usually through “checks and balances” between branches of the state, namely, the executive, legislature and the judiciary. Modern democracy has aspired to be a representative democracy, that is, one based on elected representatives who represent citizens, and the concept is linked with the idea of a nation-state (SIDA 1999). It is important to remember that democracy has not been static but has evolved over the centuries and decades. Democracy was exclusive in its early years: slaves, women, blacks and the colonised were excluded from its ambit in early democracies. It continues to

evolve in different ways in different societies and cultures, although its core characteristics of certain freedoms, rights and pluralism remain central. Indeed, building democracy itself is not an event but a process, and a long-term one at that. This process of democratisation has sometimes been described as a “work in progress” since no society can legitimately claim to be fully democratised. Even in such matters as election management, there have been notable lapses in older democracies, most recently in the 2000 US presidential election. It is in this broader context that we use the concept of democracy.

By “sustainable development” we refer to a process of development that has a number of features. Economic development is only one feature among several relating to sustainable development. Sustainable development relates to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Indeed, the argument has been made that sustainable development requires the empowerment of social groups, equity, co-operation and security in a particular country (UNDP 1997). Sustainable development should give priority to the poor rather than marginalise them, sustain the environment rather than degrade it, and advance women rather than discriminate against them (Speth 1997). Democracy itself stands better chances of consolidation where there is satisfactory human development. It is not possible to attain high levels of participation and empowerment in the development and political processes where illiteracy and unemployment are high, where education is lacking, and gender inequalities are glaring (SADC 1998). The consolidation of democracy and good governance should simultaneously contribute to stronger foundations for sustainable development. There should be synergy between the two processes.

Let us now look at current trends relating to poverty on the African continent. It has been estimated that about 300 million Africans—nearly half of the continent’s population—live on US \$0.65 a day (in purchase power parity) and that this number is still growing (World Bank 2000a). One definition classifies those who

live on less than US \$1 as living in poverty. The conditions relating to poverty currently appear gloomy:

a severe lack of capabilities—education, health and nutrition—among Africa’s poor threatens to make poverty ‘dynastic’ with the descendants of the poor also remaining poor. The rural poor account for 80 percent of African poverty, but urban poverty is substantial and appears to be growing (SADC 1998).

Some estimates state that poverty afflicts more than 40 per cent of the urban population, and the average annual income of this group is put at US \$352 a year, compared to an average income of US \$163 a year for the rural poor. Indeed, more than half of the urban population is poor in Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, amongst other countries. Quite clearly, poverty is the current state of existence of a significant proportion of Africa’s rural and urban populations. A notable feature of poverty in Africa is that it exists in a context of high inequality. Both rural and urban incomes are unequally distributed, and there is considerable inequity in the distribution of social spending with the higher-income groups benefiting more. For instance, the poorest 20 per cent of Africans account for just a little over 5 per cent of total house consumption. Such countries as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe boast high levels of Gini co-efficient of well above 55 per cent.

The overall picture is therefore of a deepening of poverty on the continent. Whereas just over 18 per cent of inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa lived on less than US \$1a day in 1987, the proportion had grown considerably by the end of the 1990s, as we saw above. Levels of poverty actually grew in such countries as Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Only a few countries appear to have experienced a decline in poverty, and they include Ghana, Mauritania and Uganda. A number of factors have contributed to the intensification of poverty. One of them is HIV/AIDS, which has spread quickly across the continent resulting in the death of an estimated 18 million out of the 23 million HIV/AIDS deaths worldwide. Some of the highest infection rates are in Southern Africa, where they reach about 20

per cent of the adult population. The epidemic has a tendency to be concentrated amongst the most productive and more skilled sector of the population, those between 20 and 50 years of age. Although the economic impact of the epidemic cannot be quantified in precise terms, it is believed to be enormous. The social impact will be far-reaching with the rapid increase of AIDS orphans, who are likely to top 12 million in Africa soon. This will exacerbate poverty, at least in the short term, as the size of the dependent population without parental economic support grows.

This leads us to a consideration of sustainable development in the context of deepening poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Indicators which bear relevance are those that relate to life expectancy, child mortality, and access to basic social services such as education and health. Drawing from a World Bank report, we can observe that infant mortality is close to 10 per cent with, on average, 157 of every 1000 children dying before the age of five (World Bank 2000a). In some countries, the rate is above 200 per 1000. This is an unacceptably high rate of infant mortality which speaks volumes about formidable constraints to access to health facilities and satisfactory nutrition. While access to education is believed to be indispensable to development, there has been no consistence in the levels of provision of education both at primary and secondary levels. Indeed, it is estimated that primary enrolments dropped between 1980 and 1993 from 80 to 72 per cent (World Bank 2000a). Primary school enrolments were now even lower amongst the rural poor. Less than a quarter of the continent's school-going population is enrolled in secondary schools although the rates vary significantly from country to country. Income, gender and region determine whether children are enrolled in primary and secondary schools. Access to basic health services by the poor is similarly handicapped. This is against the background that ill-health in Africa results much more from infectious diseases and nutritional deficiencies than it does elsewhere. As it has been observed:

the burden of disease is dramatically higher in Africa than elsewhere. And the disease pattern is different. Malaria, river

blindness, sleeping sickness and HIV/AIDS occur elsewhere in the world but are concentrated in Africa. Malaria, for which 80 percent of cases occur in Africa, accounts for 11 percent of the disease burden in Africa and is estimated to cost many African countries more than 1 percent of their GDP. . . (World Bank 2000a).

Public spending on health varies by country but it is often inadequate to meet the enormous needs of health institutions. Cutbacks under structural adjustment programmes have made further inroads into the already weakened budgets. The growing number of patients with HIV-related illnesses has imposed a heavy burden on an already fragile social sector. Unequal access to health facilities is confirmed by a sample of seven countries which showed that the poorest 20 per cent of the population received only 12 per cent of the health subsidy compared to the more than 30 per cent received by the richest 20 per cent of the population (World Bank 2000a). Finally, life expectancy, which had risen between 1950 and 1990, began to stagnate and went on to decline in the 1990s. One of the principal factors was, of course, HIV/AIDS, which we have already observed above. Human development will not improve significantly until the basic indices of life expectancy, education and health show a sustained upward improvement.

Any discussion of the prospects of sustainable development should not overlook the contribution of civil conflicts to the continent's predicament. It has been estimated that about 20 per cent of Africans live in countries wrecked by conflict. Nearly 20 African countries have experienced at least one period of civil strife since 1960; and the enormous costs have been borne in the shape of destroyed infrastructure, loss of institutional capacity and social capital as well as flight of financial and human capital (World Bank 2000a). Internal and interstate conflicts have greatly contributed to a decline in the pace of economic development and adversely affected conditions of stability. The economic, social and political legacies of these conflicts will affect development for decades. We can see that the African dilemma is a very complex one. Historical factors, the political environment and internal



national policies all have a major bearing on the prospects for democratisation and sustainable development.

Let us now briefly examine trends relating to democratisation in Africa. There was a great deal of promise, if not euphoria, in the late 1980s and early 1990s that Africa was then irrevocably set on a path of democratisation. In some countries, military regimes were giving way to constitutions which enshrined multiparty systems and democratic elections. In others, national conferences appeared to herald a new era of consultations and consensus on constitutional and political issues. Political participation seemed to have reached higher levels than at any other time since independence in most countries. The era of the one-party state was drawing to a close in an international context in which the Cold War had drawn to a close. There appeared to be a consensus that democracy, through multipartyism and regular “free and fair elections”, was a pre-condition for “good governance,” a new concept which began to be increasingly deployed in the international donor community. This “new language” of democracy and good governance gained primacy in a global environment in which socialism had received enormous setbacks, if not collapse, leaving the ideological high ground mainly to neo-liberal perspectives of the market and governance. There was a linkage drawn between good governance and economic development as well as access to loans and aid. Countries which demonstrated some progress on the democracy path would be rewarded, while those which showed none were penalised in terms of access to aid and lending. It was, therefore, scarcely surprising that most countries expected the “democracy dividend” to usher in significant assistance, lending and investment. It was an era of considerable optimism. As some analysts observed about this short-lived era,

starting in 1990, the number of political protests in sub-Saharan Africa rose dramatically, from about 20 incidents annually during the 1980s to a peak of some 86 major protest events across 30 countries in 1991. The following marked a pinnacle of a trend of increased political liberty in which African

governments gradually introduced reforms to guarantee previously denied civil rights. There was also a marked upswing in the number of competitive national elections, from no more than two annually in the 1980s to a record 14 in 1993. That the general direction of change was toward democracy is evidenced by the gradually increased availability of basic political rights, which climbed steadily from a low point in 1989 to a peak in 1994. . . (Bratton and van de Walle 1997).

As a consequence of this continent-wide ferment, some 35 countries had undergone regime change by December 1994. Adding considerable weight to this democratisation was the transition from apartheid to majority rule in South Africa. Later in the decade, military rule in Africa's most populous state of Nigeria collapsed, making way to a democratically elected government in early 1999.

How sustainable has the democratisation wave been since the mid-1990s? Building and consolidating democracy was going to be protracted, rather than a smooth and short-term process. And so it has proved to be more difficult and complicated than the earlier optimism and naiveté allowed. In certain instances, there have indeed been reverses as the military has overthrown elected governments, spelling an early end to brief democratic experiments and a return to authoritarian rule. Elsewhere, new democracies survive, but elected rulers have lapsed back into manipulating political rules in order to consolidate their hold on power (Bratton and van de Walle 1997). In these fledging democracies, the formal trappings of democracy co-exist with neo-patrimonial practices. Contests continue to be waged around citizenship issues, constitutional rights and freedoms as well as on the degree of the "freeness and fairness" of the elections. The principal challenge remains institutionalising democratic structures, practices and culture in most countries.

### **3. Approaches to Conceptualisation of the Linkage between Democracy and Development**

Broadly speaking, there are three contending approaches to the issue of linkage and compatibility between democracy and sustainable development. The first sees an inextricable connection and posits that democracy would not be sustainable without a parallel process of economic development, and vice versa. The second approach argues that it is not feasible to build democracy while simultaneously pursuing a vigorous development process. According to this position, the economic base should first be expanded and strengthened, and this accumulation process is mainly possible under authoritarian political conditions. The third identifies flaws in both these approaches and argues for a feasible simultaneity of the processes of democracy, development and poverty reduction.

Let us begin by assessing the proposition that democracy and development go, or ought to go, together. Those who correlate democracy to economic development seek to build their case for *prima facie* plausibility on the fact that the wealthiest countries in the world are democracies. As one analyst once observed, the earliest instance of this position was propagated by Adam Smith, who, in his *Wealth of Nations*, strongly argued for political liberalism as the necessary condition for effective operation of the market, which he considered the engine of economic growth (Ake 2000). However, the most sustained argument regarding the correlation between democracy and economic development was that presented by Lipset. After studying samples of countries from different regions, he established that for each regional set, there was a correspondence between democracy and higher levels of economic development (Lipset 1959). His argument was that economic development was associated with more education, assertiveness and a push for participation and that it tempered the tone of politics and created cross-cutting interests and multiple affiliations which facilitated democratic consensus-building and political stability. Furthermore, economic development was associated with growth and vitality in associational life and civil

society (Lipset 1959). In sum, this position argues that the chances for democratic consolidation improve with economic development. There appeared to be strong positive relationship between education, literacy rates and democracy, and what was undeniable was that fledgling democracies required sustained economic growth whatever the level of economic development they started from (Beetham 1994). This position is broadly supported by international financial institutions such as the World Bank which have sought to link progress on the democracy front, or rather “good governance” as they refer to it, to support for economic reform programmes (World Bank 1997). According to this position, which sees a correlation between democracy and development, the issue of compatibility of the two processes does not arise. The correlation is an imperative. However, there is little nuance in this position as regards late developing countries such as those in Africa which have had to grapple with the two processes from a low base.

The second approach argues for an authoritarian developmental regime as the more effective institution under which rapid economic development can be organised in the contemporary world. The gist of the argument is that people who are not materially well-off, which is the bulk of populations in developing countries, cannot afford to postpone consumption. To the extent that democracy gives opportunity to this population, including the poor, to shape public policy, it would be biased in favour of immediate consumption and against savings and investment, and this would make their influence prejudicial to growth (Huntington 1968). Some analysts have gone on to suggest that it was desirable for governments to be shielded from unproductive consumption, and that it was even sometimes necessary to compel investment (Haggard 1990). According to this approach, dictatorships are desirable for economic development because political participation needs to be limited, albeit temporarily, in order to speed up accumulation. Lee Kwam Yew, a former Prime Minister of Singapore, one of the most successful Asian tigers, was quoted as stating: “I do not believe that democracy necessarily leads to development.... The exuberance of democracy leads to

indiscipline and disorderly conduct which is inimical to development.” In addition, a leading weekly in the West observed that authoritarian governments found it easier to get out of poverty than democratic governments (*Economist* June 29, 1991). That had been a principal factor behind East and Southeast Asia having the fastest-growing economies for the previous 25 years without having the “best” democracies but, rather, authoritarian regimes. According to this position, democracy and sustainable development are not compatible nor can they be pursued simultaneously with success. It is a somewhat bleak commentary on Africa’s prospects of successfully carrying through democracy and sustainable development together at the same time.

What are the weaknesses of the two above-mentioned approaches as they relate to Africa’s prospects? The first approach, which emphasises the compatibility, indeed the virtuous connection, between democracy and development tends to overlook the historical dimensions that continue to have an impact on Africa’s present. In the global scheme of things, Africa is expected to leapfrog stages of economic and political development which took several centuries in Europe and the Americas. The assumption is that there already exists a paradigm which Africa should adopt: pluralist democracy and “free” market economy as per the Western experience with minor modifications. Analyses which point to the different, and more comfortable sequencing of economic development and democratisation in the West, and to the long-term consequences of colonialism for political and economic development in Africa are usually viewed as backward-looking or special pleading. Yet the deficit in economic growth and democratisation under colonialism, which met its final demise in the last quarter of the 20th century, could not fail to have a stunting effect on African institutions and development, broadly speaking.

This emerging orthodoxy appears to centre on the “blame the victim approach”, i.e., that in spite of what we know of 20th century history, Africans should blame themselves for their backward economic and political development. It is a small step

from this position to justifying certain prescriptions that should be followed so that Africa can “catch up” with the rest of the world. One of them is economic structural adjustment, which has been implemented in most African countries without dramatic successes. Indeed, there has been a reversal of earlier gains in certain sectors, such as education and health, as we observed above. Increasingly, conditionality has been tied to funding for economic reform programmes, further constraining the room of manoeuvre of governments. The tensions between these austerity measures and popular material expectations have sometimes broken into “food riots” and harsh authoritarian responses by beleaguered regimes. Adverse consequences of economic reforms have deepened social polarisation in fragile states, raised the stakes of repression and thrown the future of democratisation into doubt. There is, therefore, nothing automatic about economic reform and development acting as an incubator of sustainable democratisation.

The second approach—“development first, democracy later”—is similarly flawed. Most countries in Africa that have been under the sway of authoritarian regimes have experienced economic decline rather than sustained accumulation leading to growth. Indeed, as has been argued,

with minor exceptions, Africa is still struggling to overcome a legacy of political authoritarianism, a legacy which has been associated with growing poverty and immiseration. In these circumstances, debating the merits of authoritarianism for development and whatever value does not arise. It does not arise, not only because authoritarianism has been catastrophic politically and economically, but also because Africa is now racing to achieve a democratic political renewal in order to avoid compounding its economic marginality in an outmoded political tradition . . . (Ake 2000).

Authoritarianism in Africa has not been associated, as East Asia was, with a rigorous accumulation programme which led to rapid economic development consisting of high levels of access to education, health services, employment, rising incomes and equity

in the second half of the 20th century. The African experience in authoritarianism tended to be characterised by neo-patrimonialism as well as self-aggrandisement by the leadership. Witness the excessive personal wealth of some of the leaders such as the late Abacha and Mobutu of Nigeria and the DRC, respectively. A simultaneous (and potentially successful) process of democracy building and development would seem to require a different approach altogether from the somewhat simplistic, if not a-historical, approaches briefly sketched above.

#### **4. Towards a Synthesis: Pursuing Democracy, Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Simultaneously**

This paper has so far highlighted the profound dilemma of the continent as it struggles to grapple with the imperatives of late development and democratisation. It has also argued that it would not be realistic to adopt an “either/or approach” or one which gives more primacy to democracy rather than development, or vice versa in the present conjuncture. The argument for a hierarchy of priorities that would put economic growth and poverty reduction first before attending to democracy, and vice versa, is flawed. Clearly, unlike the West and the East, Africa does not have the historical convenience of choosing how to sequence its democratisation and development processes. The internal demands for material improvement, freedom and participation continue to rise while the external demands of globalisation exert enormous pressure on national economies and cultures. The continent has to seek innovative ways and strategies of addressing the twin challenges which confront it. Let us refer to a current of thought which appears to chart a way out of the above-mentioned dilemma. It is a current of thought which, firstly, observes that much of Africa is neither substantively economically developed nor democratic yet, nor simply authoritarian, but that it is at some stage of transition (Ake 2000). Still, the debate about compatibility and simultaneity of the development and democratisation processes had not been about this potentially unique transition process.

Secondly, the issue of simultaneity cannot be solved without addressing shortcomings of prevailing development strategies, most of which centre on conventional structural adjustment. Addressing these shortcomings could lead to a radically different development strategy. Orthodox thinking has hitherto attempted to address the issue without synthesising the elements that constitute the dilemma. Thirdly, it would appear that there is no other way of stemming authoritarianism and thus achieve some coherence and a minimum of political legitimacy without democracy, especially in the sense that democracy boils down to striving to move forward together by negotiated consensus (*ibid.*). The often-heard concern that the opening of democratic space would throw up more groups pulling in different directions, lead to demand overload, and possibly anarchy should be challenged. As it was remarked:

the logic of this argument is uneasy—it is upside down. It is not the opening of democratic spaces that brings about more groups to demand rights, rules and autonomy. It is the making of demands, especially the demand for rights, justice, incorporation and the like, which brings about the opening of democratic spaces. . . (Ake 2000).

Fourthly, in the African context, democratisation cannot be limited to multiparty elections as we observed in a preceding section. In order to ensure effective participation in a new dispensation, democratisation should address the social and economic vulnerabilities of ordinary people, such as the poverty and inequalities outlined in the preceding section on the African dilemma. As Ake (2000) argued:

by all indications, these vulnerabilities can only be addressed by social transformation, by massive social, cultural and economic upliftment of the poor in Africa. Without this, there is no democracy. . .

According to this perspective, the issue of imperative linkage and mutual interdependence between the two processes renders redundant the question of compatibility. Without democratisation,



development will not be sustainable. At the same time, without progress in human development and economic growth, democratisation will rest on very fragile foundations. The path towards simultaneous sustainable development and democratisation is therefore “to collapse both processes into one by making development itself a process of democratisation” (Ake 2000). Sustainable development becomes a process of democratisation by being an incremental empowerment of ordinary people across all social, class and ethnic divides. This is how sustainable development should have been conceived in the first place. As the theme has been articulated from a human development perspective:

achievements in eradicating human poverty depend, first and foremost, on people’s ability to articulate their demands and mobilise for collective action. Isolated and dispersed, poor people have no power and no influence over political decisions which affect their lives. But organised, they have the power to ensure that their interests are observed (UNDP 1997).

Participation and empowerment have become key rallying concepts in this discourse, which emphasises the inextricable linkage between development and democratisation.

Although the conceptual plausibility of the case has been more or less established, the more demanding question remains that of “What is therefore to be done?” or rather “Which is the way forward?” The depth of the contemporary African crisis is indeed immense: it is complicated by the debt overhang, poverty, the spread of HIV/AIDS and both inter-state and intra-state conflicts. These conspire to retard sustainable development and, by extension, the democratisation process. This is the context in which estimations have been made about the respective roles of the state and civil society in shaping the transition to sustainable development and democratisation. At a basic level, this implies that the respective roles of governments and those organisations which constitute civil society will be central in the transition and

transformation that will be necessary to put development and democratisation on a sustainable basis.

Here, we will not attempt to recap in detail the debate on the nature and role of the African state, and the various phases through which that debate has gone. In the 1980s, the orthodoxy admonished “the rolling back” of the state and giving free rein to supposedly “free market” forces. The retrenchment or down-sizing of the state was part and parcel of the conditionalities of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). However, although there was a substantial restructuring of state institutions, this did not necessarily result in improved growth nor in the effectiveness in the reach of those institutions. Indeed, some of the adverse consequences of that restructuring included diminished access to key social services such as education and health (which are central to human development) and to agricultural extension services and rural infrastructure (which are indispensable to rural development and poverty alleviation).

The orthodoxy on “rolling back the state” came under challenge as the 1990s progressed, leading to a major revision of the state’s role by none other than the World Bank itself. It was candidly acknowledged that

as so often happens with such radical shifts in perspective, countries sometimes tended to overshoot the mark. Efforts to re-balance government spending and borrowing were uncoordinated, and good was often cut as the bad. To meet their interest rate obligations, countries in debt squeezed critically important programmes in education, health and infrastructure as—or more than—they cut low-priority programmes, bloated civil service and money-losing enterprises. Cuts came primarily in capital budgets and, in Africa, in operating and maintenance outlays further reducing the efficiency of investment. The result, seen most starkly in Africa, was neglect of the state’s vital functions, threatening social welfare and eroding the foundation of market development (World Bank 1997).

There has, therefore, been a paradigm shift regarding the state's role in sustainable development; it is now generally accepted that development without an effective state is impossible. Policies and programmes aimed at addressing poverty reduction require a pivotal participation of the state.

It is in this context that the debate has shifted to one which focuses on how the role of the state in the quest of sustainable development can be enhanced. In particular, there exists an imperative to build state capacity to effectively handle the multifaceted development priorities. State capacity can be defined as the ability of a government to implement its policies and accomplish its goals. It is capacity with several dimensions: regulatory, administrative, technical and extractive capacity (Brautigam 1996). Politicians and technocrats need to address the capacity weaknesses where it exists in any of these dimensions. Some analysts have gone further to argue that a major lesson from the Asian experiences is that state capacity should not be seen merely in terms of the prowess and perspicacity of technocrats within the state apparatus, but in terms of a durable institutional structure (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999).

More significantly, a developmental state should be socially anchored, and its autonomy embedded in the social fabric that constitutes the nation. As it was cogently argued:

a major challenge in transforming the African state into a developmental one is to go beyond merely enhancing its technobureaucratic capacity and seek to embed such a developmental state within democratic social institutions and governance frameworks.... What Africa does not need is more "good" governance like that defined in narrow, technocratic, functionalist terms meant to further the goals of an adjustment model.... What Africa does need is a system of democratic governance in which political actors have the space to freely and openly debate, negotiate, and design an economic reform package that is integral to the construction of a new contract for ushering Africa into the 21st century... (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999).

Thus the state, as a central actor, should be both a developmental and democratising state: there should be no contradiction in these two complementary roles.

However, pivotal though the state's role is, the role of civil society organisations has also become increasingly important in both democratisation and development processes. Indeed, in the democratisation wave that swept across the continent in the 1990s, civil society organisations (CSOs) were prominent in exerting pressure for change on authoritarian regimes. Such active CSOs have included labour unions, human rights organisations, women's groups, business associations and youth organisations. In the simultaneous pursuit of democratisation and sustainable development, the energies and innovativeness of CSOs in the form of the array of various NGOs should be harnessed (Sachikonye 1998; 2001). This entails ensuring that the autonomy of CSOs is not compromised, and that their contributions essentially complement those of the state. There are several areas where CSOs appear to have a comparative advantage. The advantage consists in their proximity to the grassroots; they are close to the population at this level and therefore tend to be aware of its needs and interests. CSOs can be important mobilising agents and in that way instil a greater civil consciousness besides contributing to the social capital and material development of society. There exists scope for a closer partnership between the state and CSOs in sustainable development activities. For example, local provisioning of literacy, adult education, health, crop extension, micro-enterprise credit, water and social welfare could be done more effectively in complementarity with CSOs (SADC 1998).

Finally, although not a central actor, the International Community should not be let off the hook on matters of sustainable development and democratisation. It should play a more facilitative rather than passive and obstructionist role. International financial and development institutions, donor states, and NGOs can make potentially vital contributions to the development and democratisation processes in partnership with the national governments and CSOs. Substantial debt relief and a

more favourable trade regime that encourages exports from Africa would have an immediate impact on the prospects of poverty reduction and growth. Strategic partnerships that go beyond the conventional aid relationship will be necessary. The role of these should be essentially aimed at complementing national efforts at sustainable development. An increased focus on debt relief and the associated move to development co-operation more effectively would enhance these partnerships. Of equal importance, as we saw above, would be actions in other areas—investments, vaccines, the closing of the digital and knowledge divides—that can enhance the opportunity, empowerment and security of poor people (World Bank 2000a; 2000b). Thus, in the final analysis, the challenge of pursuing sustainable development and democratisation is not entirely a national effort or project but one in which the International Community should play a valuable role. How to define the framework in which that International Community and the national state and CSOs can work together productively and amicably is an important and necessary task in its own right.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper sought to explore the provocative question relating to whether democracy, sustainable development and poverty were compatible in the African context. It is a question which has generated a great deal of animated debate in academic and policy circles not only in Africa but also elsewhere in the developing world. This is an acknowledgement of the different historical conditions in which development and democratisation are being pursued compared to those under which older democracies were consolidated. The issue of sequencing these processes runs through much of the debate with one of the current thoughts arguing for greater attention to development to reduce poverty before democracy can be built on a sustained basis.

The paper began sketching what it termed elements of “the African dilemma,” which range from persistent poverty in most countries—poverty that afflicts nearly half of the continent’s

population—to the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and to civil conflicts including inter-state and intra-state conflicts. In addition, reference was made to the historical legacies of colonialism, which retarded the processes of democratisation and sustainable development. In combination, these elements or factors have conspired to create enormous constraints on attempts to achieve sustainable development and democratisation. This formed the background to the conceptual discussion on whether it is feasible to pursue both processes simultaneously in the current conjuncture in Africa. The implication of this conceptual question was that the processes of democratisation and sustainable development through poverty reduction may not be compatible and therefore would require sequencing of some sort. After reviewing the various conceptual approaches to this issue, the paper argued that a simultaneous pursuit of democratisation and sustainable development was not a matter of choice in contemporary Africa. It was an urgent imperative. To postpone attending to democratisation in order to consolidate development first or vice versa is, therefore, not an issue in the African context, such as it was in the West and the East. This is an argument emphasised in a synthesis of the various strands of experiences and debates about *compatibility* between democratisation and sustainable development. It is observed that an effective state as well as an activist civil society will be central agents in these processes. At the same time, the International Community has an obligation to facilitate these processes because it would be in its own long-term interest to do so in terms of global stability, development and peace.

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