

Empowerment for Active Citizenry in Africa

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Abstract

This article explores ways in which empowerment for responsible citizenry in Africa can be enhanced. It emphasizes the roles of holistic education and development, employment, and basic needs security in the empowerment process and development of capabilities. The article aims at sensitizing African leaders and citizens towards responsibility, accountability, and transparency in service so that people take their responsibilities seriously and so determine their own destiny. One of the most important tools of achieving the aforementioned goal is through honest empowerment that gives people power to live confidently by participating actively and responsibly in the socio-economic and political activities of today's globalized world.

Keywords: Empowerment, responsible citizenry, Africa, education, development, employment, basic needs security, capabilities

1. Introduction

Many factors have hindered, and continue to hinder, active participation of many African citizens in socio-economic and political affairs of their respective countries. Firstly, many African citizens are not aware of their rights and obligations in nation building. Secondly, many African nations are over dependent on foreign aid to sustain their socio-economic and political activities; and many people just want things done for them, that is, to be 'spoon-fed' rather than take responsibility and do things by themselves. Thirdly, many African countries are undergoing some structural changes including a democratization process, thus there is need for civic education. Fourthly, poverty is a real social issue in Africa since it dehumanizes human persons and alienates them from social involvement. Eradicating poverty should have a high priority throughout the continent. And, finally, many African citizens have untapped capabilities and talents, hence the need for capacity building and skills training.

2. The Concept of Empowerment

It is difficult to define precisely the term empowerment because it has many facets . . . In discussing the concept of empowerment, one should focus on the following questions: What is empowerment? Who should empower? Who should be empowered? What should be empowered?

Mondros and Scott (1994:228) define empowerment as "a psychological state, a sense of competence, control, and entitlement that allows people to pursue concrete activities aimed at becoming powerful". The empowerment process takes place at various levels: family, regional, national, and international. It is the right of every person in society to seek empowerment. However, special attention should be on those people who are marginalized and vulnerable such as the poor people from rural areas; refugees and internally displaced persons; homeless and elderly people; the sick; the uneducated; and the unemployed. What should be empowered? The focus must be on the growth of the human person in all his or her capabilities which can bring about change. When these capabilities are well developed and activated, individuals will seek to determine their own destiny and so become active and responsible citizens.

Some pertinent features can be helpful in describing empowerment. First, empowerment involves helping citizens to change from passive and dependent citizens into more independent, active, responsible, and participating citizens. Second, empowerment entails helping citizens to understand that they have various potentials and power; and helping them put these powers into active and productive use. Third, empowerment implies acquiring skills and so a person can determine his or her own destiny. Finally, through access to relevant information, a person will confidently participate in decision-making processes that concern his or her life and those of others, and hence become an agent of change.

Confidence-building among individuals and groups is an important aspect of empowerment. Empowerment should thus be geared towards encouraging people to be more powerful in the sense of becoming agents of substantive change.

3. Reclaiming the Existential Condition of the Black Self in Africa

This section speaks to how black people in Africa regard themselves in view of their history and experience. In this discussion, the term ‘black person’ will refer to black Africans and people of black ancestry. The section will also offer some suggestions that can empower the African people to recuperate from the distorted image of blackness based on their disfigured history and race; and thus enable them to rise above racial mediocrity and focus on development and responsibility.

A good understanding of African history is important if one is to address the need of empowerment for responsible citizenry in Africa. History is full of values. According to Ojara (2006:328), “history makes people who they are; in history people actualize what it means to be human; history defines people’s identity, moulds their expectations, and forms the direction which life and existence takes”.

African history is marked with cruelty and violence which took the form of slavery and colonization. These weakened the positive inner resources of many blacks. The cruel history changed the African worldview in ways that in a sense stripped them of certain dignity and freedom. Thus, in essence, many Africans have not been privileged existentially since they have undergone centuries of contempt and degradation. As a result, the psychic situation of black persons has precipitated them into a heritage of a complex and problematic sense of the self (Ojara 2006).

Some black people continue to face racial discrimination and contempt and are even denied certain opportunities to develop their talents and potentialities, which they seem to have lost during centuries of subjugation and dehumanization triggered by slavery and colonization. As a result, sometimes the talents of an African person are hardly recognized by non-Africans. As Ojara (2006:331) emphasizes, “the heritage of blacks is indeed one that is marked by certain attitudes, values and sensibilities which tend to unleash onto blacks the aura of racial nullification through a domineering psychic category of white supremacy”.

In European history, for instance, blackness signified inferiority, insecure consciousness, precarious existence, powerlessness, ignorance, filth, poverty, and backwardness. These pejorative interpretations of blackness have left many blacks with inner fears, outward distortion, and the stigma of degradation; hence, some blacks still feel ashamed of themselves (Ojara 2006). This distorted view of Africans has jeopardized some people’s personal sense of integrity and identity so that they experience a sort of psychological degradation and social contempt. This negative attitude needs to be transformed by the Africans themselves so that they may re-define their history and develop a positive image of themselves rooted in their intrinsic significance. It is against this recognition of the unconditional sense of worth that Africans will acquire impetus to determine their own destiny.

Even after independence, many African leaders became dictatorial and coercive, and hence continued to rob the African citizens of their confidence and sense of significance. The failure of some independent African states to be self-reliant politically, socially, and economically, heightened their sense of insignificance. Sometimes the Africans themselves attribute their failures to “Africanness” instead of taking responsibility to address their problems and so improve their situation.

There is a great need for many blacks to reclaim their sense of worth lost due to effects of slavery and colonization. Their worth should be rooted in the unconditional validation based on their intrinsic worth rather than being preoccupied with the conditional sense of worth based on external validation. Africans should be aware of their resourcefulness and understand that there is no correlation between skin pigmentation and intelligence, because ontologically, human beings are constituted the same way with the same spiritual and material components.

4. Development of Capabilities

Amartya Sen (1999) defines development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. In his book, *Development as Freedom*, Sen does not only emphasize expanding people’s freedom but also on factors which are necessary for the development of greater human freedoms such as food, security, clean water, sanitation, education, health care, shelter, and employment opportunities. Sen considers the above factors as important means to substantive freedom, which ought to be the main goal of development.

Sen's capability approach can be an empowering tool for Africa since it focuses on the development and expansion of people's capabilities for being active agents in attaining their desired goals. This is important because of certain attitudes of passivity that some African citizens have developed by over-reliance on others rather than taking initiatives and exercising personal responsibility. Therefore, local capacities should be recognized and developed.

Sen's ideas of functionings, capabilities, and agency in defining the capability approach are very vital in the empowerment process. According to Sen, functionings refers to the valuable activities and states that make up people's well-being such as a healthy body, safety, an educated mind, and a good job. These functionings should be developed since they are fundamental for an active citizenry. They reflect what a person is capable of doing and what one can become (Sen 1999). Sen defines capabilities as the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for a person to achieve. These imply substantive freedoms that a person enjoys so as to lead the kind of life that one has a reason to value.

The functionings and capabilities described above cannot develop in a vacuum; they require agency; the ability to pursue goals that one values and has reason to value – being an agent means that a person takes action himself or herself to bring about constructive change. Agency is contrasted with passive citizenship in which a person does not participate actively in bringing about change; hence, fails to be an agent of change. African people should thus be empowered to be agents of change, which entails active participation in ensuring one's well-being as well as the well-being of others in society. This must be one of the goals of African nations in creating responsible citizenry. The basis for active agency is through holistic education, which has the potential of making people become much more productive over time, and hence able to contribute greatly to the process of economic expansion.

Nevertheless, Sen's concept of freedom is too generalized. He advocates the expansion of people's capabilities, but he does not enumerate the specific capabilities to be developed. We can thus complement Sen's capabilities approach with Nussbaum's (2000) ten central functional human capabilities, which are central for development. These include life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species (animals, plants, and other gifts of nature); play (recreational activities); and control over one's environment (political and material). When these functional human capabilities are well developed, then we can rightly speak of human development.

5. Education and Empowerment

Education is important in forming enlightened and active citizens. It is a kind of human awakening, an awakening that liberates the individual, first in his or her inner life and subsequently in their social life. For Jacques Maritain, "the education of tomorrow must provide the common man with the means for his personal fulfilment, not only with regard to his labour but also with regard to his social and political activities in civil commonwealth, and to the activities of his leisure hours" (Allard, 1982:84).

To raise the level of literacy and numeracy among the African people, education should be accessible and affordable to all. An educational system should be reconstructed to provide for critical self-awareness. This will equip people with different skills to enable them to do things for themselves. Provision of quality education should be emphasized because it plays a major role in human development. It develops people's potentialities and creativity thus increasing their productivity.

5.1 Holistic Education

Africans should embrace a holistic education system. Holistic education generally refers to education in its entirety, that is, an educational system that equips people with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes both for life (moral and character formation) and for living (prepares persons to earn their livelihood). Holistic education should help a person to experience life holistically and interactively for the purpose of furthering physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth. This education should also be contextual with a focus on addressing current problems experienced in many African countries such as corruption, poverty, bad governance, disease, unemployment, and the dependency syndrome.

5.2 Afro-centric Education

African governments and other stakeholders in education must be committed to providing an educational system that is rooted in the unique African history and reflecting African experiences. The aim of such education should be to correct the effects of slavery and colonization, which dehumanized African people. It should be focused on providing a holistic education that not only promotes academic excellence but also the spiritual development of the African people. Such an educational system will foster a sense of social responsibility, and hence make African citizens capable of having a sense of self-determination and a positive self-image.

Afro-centric education should be tailor-made to address the continent's problems and needs. It is sad to see that most educational systems in Africa are still of colonial types despite efforts to transform the educational systems to reflect the African experience. Some African elites still send their children to Western schools, which are structured for Euro-centric educational objectives. This out flux of students from African educational institutions is attributed to poor quality education as well as poor educational facilities in many African countries. But who will save Africa, when the elite who are expected to enhance African development are running away from African problems instead of addressing them? It is high time that Africans take their continent seriously because the fate of Africa is in their hands. Afro-centric education should train people for jobs so that people can become economically self-supporting in the global world. People should also be trained to love manual work as opposed to more emphasis on white-collar jobs. Education should thus be centered towards creation of productive jobs. Relevant subjects such as mathematics, science and technology are to be emphasized in the curriculum.

Afro-centric education should be structured in such a way that it creates people who are capable of doing things by themselves, people who can make informed socio-economic and political decisions and can at the same time influence such decisions. This can discourage dependency so that people do not only ask for what their country can do for them but also what they can do to their country.

African-centered education is the key to creating responsible citizens capable of participating actively in nation building. Therefore, there is need to expand education facilities at all levels: elementary, primary, secondary, tertiary; vocational; and special education. Instead of investing a lot of resources in military, as is the case with many African countries, these resources ought to be re-channeled towards expanding educational opportunities.

5.3 Civic Education

The goal of civic education is to allow people to make responsible choices and to partake fully in the life of the nation. Schools and colleges in Africa should thus train people for duties and responsibilities. Only well-educated citizens can participate actively and knowledgeably in the affairs of the nation as opposed to indulging in passivity due to ignorance.

Many Africans are to a large extent ignorant of their basic and fundamental rights and duties. The awareness of one's rights and duties can lead to promotion and protection of such rights and obligations. But it may prove difficult to defend rights if they are not known. Yet, they cannot be known unless they are taught and understood; and this is the role of civic education.

African citizens must become critically aware of the various kinds of rights. Thus, educational institutions ought to provide mechanisms to sensitize people on their social rights, political rights, and participation rights. Social rights should, for instance, support citizens' claims to economic subsistence and social existence (Janoski 1993). Social rights include health services rights to enable the basic functioning of citizens in society and social opportunity rights such as education to allow citizens to acquire necessary skills for work and socio-cultural participation. Political rights include the rights to vote, participate in political processes, access to information, and lobbying for particular policies. However, the above rights cannot be realized unless the right to participate is in place. Participation rights refer to those rights that individuals and groups have in order to participate actively in decision-making processes in socio-political and economic realms. They include freedoms of expression and association. Participation rights can empower African citizens to participate actively in areas such as health care and environmental impact decisions, education and job creation.

It is important to note that rights ought to be accompanied with obligations. People tend to emphasize rights over obligations. This attitude of putting more emphasis on rights should shift so that citizens' rights are accompanied by a sense of responsibility. According to Janoski (1993), the silences about obligations imply irresponsibility.

Many citizens, for example, may demand government money from entitlement programs, yet they avoid paying taxes to support entitlements for others.

Another area that requires civic empowerment is the area of the constitution. Many people in Africa do not know about their countries' constitutions, let alone how the judicial systems function. How can citizens participate actively when they are ignorant of their country's constitution? Since a constitution should reflect a people's experience, it is of utmost importance that African citizens be equipped at least with some basic knowledge on the aspect of law, since ignorance before the law is no defense. From the perspective of Moon *et al* (2000), law-related education should empower citizens in areas such as the nature and function of law, the role of law in society, and its limitations.

The importance of civic education lies on the raising of citizens' civic involvement from passive participation to active participation. This can be achieved by developing among citizens both intellectual and participatory knowledge for responsible citizenship. According to Moon *et al* (2000), such knowledge is important in monitoring and influencing the formulation, implementation, adjudication, and enforcement of public policies, as well as enabling citizens to participate in voluntary efforts to solve societal problems.

6. Holistic Development

According to Wolfensohn (1998), development is about putting all the component parts in place, that is, development in totality. This means establishment of infrastructures, providing education, health care, the rule of law; promoting human freedoms, rights, and dignity; empowering the people, eliminating corruption, and protecting the environment.

Modern independent African nations tend to emphasize material development while de-emphasizing the development of the human person. According to Mosha (2000), this is not development or even underdevelopment but rather a destruction of humanity and the environment. Thus, developing African nations need to adopt a holistic approach to development.

A holistic approach to socio-economic development should encompass material development of things such as industries, roads, telecommunication, buildings, science and technology, social services like health care and education as well as the development of the human person spiritually and morally in terms of greater freedoms, dignity, and rights. Furthermore, a holistic development should emphasize conservation and promotion of the environment so that development can be sustainable. When the above elements are well developed, most African citizens will really take responsibility, and hence be in a better position to determine their own destiny.

A holistic approach to development in Africa must thus involve material, human, and environmental aspects. Material and human development are important since they complement each other. While material well-being is necessary for human advancement, human development is necessary for creativity and innovation for material development. Human development should be enhanced since "development means the development of the people" (Mosha, 2000:199). Human development inspires both material and environmental development. This implies that material developments are not development in themselves but only a means to development. Therefore, there should be a shift from an over-emphasis on material-centered development in Africa to an integral development, that is, a holistic development which involves total human development, material development, and environmental development

7. The Role of State in the Empowerment Process

Peace, security, and political stability are foundational factors in an attempt to promote any development. It is the duty of African governments to be committed to maintaining peace and stability because many African nations are experiencing civil strife or are politically unstable. When peace, security, and political stability are guaranteed, there will be a reduction in huge military spending leaving enough resources to develop other sectors such as agriculture, education, health, power generation, housing and water resources.

Active participation is not necessarily a matter of financial resources but rather a matter of mobilizing people by employing right policies, technologies and institutions. According to Drydyk (2005), people are to be empowered by development processes to be active participants rather than passive recipients. The state should thus endeavor to remove or reduce factors which tend to limit citizen's freedoms and rights to participate actively in nation building such as poverty, diseases, insecurity, and ignorance. Mechanisms ought to be put in place to empower individuals to do things by themselves rather than having things done for them.

The state should also provide or create mechanisms for citizens to access essential services such as transport and communication, health services, and education. When such services are guaranteed, people will start taking responsibilities and thus avoid the “blame game” in determining their destiny. These services will also encourage investment, leading to higher incomes and thus improve people’s living standard.

8. Basic Needs Security

Basic needs refer to those things that one cannot do without. They include food, shelter, and clothing. Consequently, people are obliged to seek these necessities. However, it is sad to realize that in some African countries, people still die from hunger and preventable and curable diseases like cholera and malaria. Therefore, African nations should ensure adequate provision of basic needs for a healthy nation since such needs are fundamental for any human functioning.

Food security should be guaranteed since it is the basis for any developmental endeavor. Hungry citizens cannot participate actively in any development and production of goods and services. Therefore, rural development should undergo structural transformation in the agricultural sector so that land is equitably owned and fairly distributed. People should also be empowered in the sustainable utilization of land and other resources. Coupled with technological innovation and development of infrastructures, agricultural production would increase leading to better health, high incomes, increased employment, and consequently an improved standard of living.

Health policies should aim at reducing morbidity and mortality. These can be achieved by promotion and expansion of primary health care services and by involving the private sector in the delivery of health services. Basic health care needed to prevent and cure common avoidable and curable ailments should be accessible to all members of society in order to have a healthy nation. Sickness hinders full participation of the citizens.

Many African countries’ housing facilities are not only inadequate but also are in a deplorable state, especially in the urban slums. Providing people with tenure is fundamental for meeting housing needs because once a person is entitled to housing, he or she will begin to improve it. In urban areas for instance, housing needs can be improved when the government provides site, security, water, electricity, and sewage services as well as loan facilities to enable people to build better houses. Slum upgrading is necessary by providing people with credit facilities and incentives to develop their own housing. This is because slums are eyesores for many African cities and towns.

Many African countries still depend on external aid to supplement their budgets. It is important to note that such aid cannot provide Africans with adequate housing, food, clothing, and medical care. Various African nations should rather mobilize their own citizens and resources to meet their own needs, thereby enhancing their freedom, creativity, innovation, and productivity. Although external assistance may be sought in aiding development of some social services, it should not be over-emphasized as this encourages dependency.

9. Expansion of Employment Opportunities

Employment is the main source of income for people. Both formal and informal employment is important in an attempt to eradicate or reduce poverty, which is one of the major social problems in Africa. Yet, most African countries are unable to provide employment opportunities for their growing populations. The consequence is continued poverty and serious brain drain, which rob many African countries of their best human resources. People leave their own countries in search of greener pasture due to lack of employment opportunities, poor remuneration, lack of job security, poor terms of service, and poor working conditions.

Employment gives a person a sense of security, self-respect, and fulfillment. Employment is an important empowerment tool in that its effects influence other vital areas of life such as education, health, and the environment. For instance, the relationship between education and employment is that demand for education will increase mainly if the prospects for better employment opportunities exist. This is because education involves costs such as fees, books, and clothes, which can only be met when a person earns some income; yet, a person will not earn income if he or she does not work.

African citizens must therefore develop a positive attitude towards all kinds of work; and they must work diligently. Many African people tend to value white-collar jobs more than blue-collar. Such an attitude hampers development in the informal sector, which is presently the backbone of many African economies. We should be committed not only to expanding both formal and informal employment opportunities but also to improving the quality of those employment opportunities in an effort to eradicate or reduce poverty and brain drain. We should endeavor to be job-creators more than job-seekers.

From the above considerations, it is paramount for African governments to devote much effort in creating more employment opportunities, especially by putting more emphasis on developing the informal sector, which is the backbone of many African economies. People should be sensitized on the importance of work as a means of self-fulfillment and service to society.

10. Democratization Process

After independence, most African countries were dominated by a single political party. Most of the leaders were dictatorial and could not allow opposition. However, since the 1990s, most post-colonial African countries got involved in a democratization process. Most democratic movements advocate a political system which recognizes and respects the rule of law, political pluralism, rights and freedoms. Therefore, areas such as multi-party democracy, free and fair elections, rights and freedoms need to be developed and promoted. Some African leaders still repress and intimidate opposition parties and even individuals who criticize the government. Furthermore, freedoms such as those of association and speech are curtailed. Many media houses are still controlled by governments, thereby making them provide biased information to the general public. The element of free and fair elections also needs to be addressed since rigging and other electoral frauds are still evidenced in many African countries. These needs make democracy a relevant system for African political contexts since it emphasizes respect for political equality and freedom, which are important values for active citizenry in the political life of Africa.

Some African governments continue to restrict even some of the fundamental freedoms like the freedoms of expression and association. For instance, during campaigns for elections, ruling parties tend to monopolize the public media to a greater extent. As a result, opposition parties cannot find equal opportunity to air their views to the general public. Such monopolies should be broken by enforcing the freedom of the media so that people can easily access relevant information they need to make informed decisions and choices. For Cheru (2002:56), a free press is “the eyes and ears of the public,” and is one of the most important elements of democracy and pluralism. People should be empowered to view democracy as a social process aimed at expanding the political space for enhanced participation in the life of the nation.

11. Sustaining Citizens’ Participation

In any social action, people tend not to be involved once their problems are solved or once their initial interests are fulfilled. This attitude eventually leads to low participation. How can the participation of the members be sustained or deepened? Members’ participation in discussions and decisions can be enhanced and sustained by getting them involved in issues so that they feel a sense of ownership in the matters at stake. This will lead to greater participation and responsibility. All African citizens ought to be seen as potential leaders who should be actively empowered to assume leadership roles. Peoples’ commitment should be continually reinforced to foster a spirit of ‘never say die’ on issues so that they come to a realization that issues are never going to be over and gone since, when one issue is accomplished, another one arises. A ‘never say die’ attitude implies a spirit of courage, hope, and optimism as opposed to a spirit of fear, despair, pessimism and fatalism. It means active involvement so that one commits his or her time, talents and energies to the transformation of society.

African nations must endeavor to create among their citizens a sense of entitlement in matters of the state. Citizens’ rights to assume responsible positions and decisional control should be enhanced and even enforced through by-laws or constitutions. Mondros and Scott (1994:80) argue that, “members cannot be retained in an organization if they don’t participate actively; participation gives members a personal stake in the organization and offers status and recognition to individual members”. If members own a strategy, they will be resolved to carry it out. Therefore, African citizens must be influenced to bring about change in the continent through education and leadership development.

12. Conclusion

The development of Africa is solely in the hands of Africans. Therefore, the process of empowering African citizens should be taken seriously so that African citizens can be able to determine their own destiny. A number of methods have been suggested in this article as tools for empowerment. They include holistic education and development, expansion of employment opportunities, and basic needs security. However, the means of empowerment cannot be used in isolation—they complement each other and should thus be integrated in the process of empowerment.

Finally, the creation of a brighter Africa, where citizens participate actively and responsibly, where every citizen enjoys peace, true prosperity and justice, is the role of all citizens. African governments must encourage a friendly environment that empowers people to freely exercise their creativity and potentialities. The prevailing passivity must be replaced with deliberate action in order to make Africa a better place for people to live, work, and become fulfilled.

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