

Symposium and Workshop
Self Help through Business and Investments
Saturday the 4th October 2008, Zurich Switzerland

Self-Reliance in a Developmental Concept: A call for Diaspora Action

Your Excellencies,
Honourable Guests of Honor,
Leaders and representatives of the African Diaspora
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be among you this afternoon and glad to be part of the human instrument and valuable resource to make the vision of a prosperous, stable, peaceful and secured Africa a reality. I thank the organising committee for their choice of inviting me to participate in this symposium and to present my papers. What a pleasure is it to see many familiar faces again.

I begin with this declaration by Henry Ford, an American car manufacturer: "A business that makes nothing but money is a poor kind of business" No one in this room, and I believe, few in our communities will disagree that the presence of many Africans in Switzerland is an eyesore and a disgrace to our families, nations and continent.

80% of Africans come into Switzerland without their real names, robbed off their identities, their dignity and honour, completely naked, they become modern day slaves of situations put in place by aggressive human and cultural resources profit making Swiss Institutions. That which is funny is that during the slavery days, it is the slaves buyers that gives names to their slaves, but in this present time of globalisation and mondialisation, it is the African exiles themselves that changes their names to suit foreign norms.

Investments and business conferences

Since the days of pomp 1970s, there have never been so many conferences on business sectors or investment in Africa today. Of the huge international conferences to small intimate meetings, all options are possible. In most cases, the presentations were interesting, relevant and very valuable for the development of the continent. The diversity and expertise of the participants - not least of 121 different nationalities in the conferences I attended in the past 12 months - reflected the growing interest that Africa is stirring in the world. Add to this the increasing number of investment funds for Africa and a much more positive image of the continent began to emerge.

Attracting investors to spout ideas

These conferences have several objectives: they attract interest on various sectors and activities, they disclose information and knowledge on African countries (often in other states on the continent), they bring together people from around the world sharing the same values, and they serve as a laboratory of ideas, stimulate creativity and sell Africa to international investors. But let us be honest, sell Africa has never been easy and it will not be much more in the future. We can complain as much as we want of foreign media and their obsession to present a negative image, the perception of the outside change a little, unless the continent does make loud and clear transformational declaration efforts.

The true definition of the trademark is not the image we present, but the image that others have of us. The combination of a country to a trademark has become an exercise requiring sophisticated control techniques developed. Generally, we do not associate a country with a brand and we believe it is what it says. The United States, and to a large extent the UK, are probably champions in the art of selling a positive image of their country. Hollywood has managed to sell the concept of American as an honest individual, heroic, funny, interesting, powerful, etc ... Television, newspapers, novels and U.S. embassies resume ever that image. And we buy this picture because it is sold. The West, particularly the United States and Europe have also developed the art of selling to investors. That is why a large share of global investments is still used today in these two regions. The more investments are, the more the economy is strong, the country is more attractive, and more investments are numerous. It is a virtuous circle.

China also adopted a branding strategy. Superb films show the Chinese people as heroic and spiritual and praise the beauty of the country. Undoubtedly, the Chinese will continue to use all means of communication to sell their cultural icons as efficiently as the British did in the last century. Bollywood, the Indian film industry, deserves a medal for 50 years selling the concept of Indian heroic. Although Indian films have not been public in the West, they know a great success throughout the rest of the world where players such as Amitabh Bachan and Shahrukh Khan, draw the crowd. However, India failed to capitalize enough on this positive image, because the reality presented abroad, on the daily life and investment opportunities in the country, is in stark contrast to the image in films. Today, the Indian state, aware of lost opportunities, is turning increasingly to the film industry to project a dynamic image of the country. This time she tries to match the image with reality.

Branding is critical

In this highly competitive world, knowledge marketing is crucial. To be more precise, branding is the key: the image you project is the image that others have of you. This strategy applies to countries, in the same way it applies to businesses and individuals. The Nike brand would do nothing if its products were of poor quality. Returning to Africa, very talented Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora could sell very well Africa as a continent to the world, because she has a promising future and as still remain the best destination in the world for investors. But they do not have enough of the film industry, television, radio or newspapers to help them in their task, but they could still use all the elements at their disposal to enhance Africa.

What will happen when you have convinced a group of investors to visit your country? Does the reality correspond – Is it equivalent to the image? Unfortunately, the answer is "no". Too many African countries are confident that investors will come anyway, and not deploy any effort to sell the assets of their country. And this is how the continent richest in the world in terms of natural resources receives about 2% of foreign direct investment (FDI). Africa can not sell enough. It is high time to invest in Marketing and Market branding of the continent. The only thing she might lose is poverty.

What Else

We have been hearing these arguments for years. It would be fruitless to repeat them yet another time. Why should we waste our time and energy appealing to the same deaf ears again and again? It is time we try something different. What I propose today is that we seek funding for transmission and acquisition knowledge, "Value Creation: Innovation and Globalization", techniques and modern working technological tools, spiritual and community values and behaviour norms.

Production of a New Knowledge

A redefinition of the very concept of knowledge and the revision of the context within which it is produced are the essential preconditions for evolving a form of education which can serve and promote a project of global self-reliance. In contrast to the idea of knowledge consecrated in the West - knowledge acquired as a result of many years' formal instruction, transmitted and certified by educational institutions - a new knowledge would be acquired in and through active engagement in social life and in the practical transformation of surrounding reality: not a rigid, static, transmitted knowledge but one in permanent recreation, built up little by little in the actual process of productive work and of social activities aimed at meeting basic needs: a knowledge whose proof of validity would be quite simply its capacity to resolve day-to-day problems by contributing to the immediate and concrete improvement of the life of a given community.

Before attempting a closer definition and making some concrete proposals for putting this new concept into practice, it should be pointed out that what is being outlined here are not simply ideal principles or pious wishes. The alternative we are sketching may be the only possible and realistic way of breaking the long chain of dependencies, forged during centuries of history, whose inexorable logic no longer needs to be demonstrated. A project for self-reliant development can be drawn up only if the principal emphasis is placed on mobilizing and making the maximum use of resources available at the level of the unit whose self-reliance is to be achieved, whether this be a small community, a region or a country (or even, in the future, a larger regional group of countries). Such an approach is fundamentally inconsistent with the utilization of advanced technology, which is the product of knowledge held by elite of over-qualified experts.

Reliance on such technology for the promotion of development obviously cannot do otherwise than increase dependency still further. So far as education is concerned, this fundamental recognition must lead to a radical rethinking of the problem of long

and costly training for a professional minority. While the need for specialized training cannot be entirely eliminated, the conditions of its production and use must undergo radical change. We shall come back to this point later. It is already becoming clear; however, that specialized training can, at most, only play a supplementary role and must be subordinated to the principal effort of encouraging the population as a whole to produce its own knowledge by its own means.

This idea is the key to the whole approach. Just as the over-qualification of a minority should be avoided, so we must prevent the phenomenon of 'de-qualification' of the majority which, marginalized by the formal education system, learns nothing helpful to its integration in production and social life. This dual phenomenon of over-qualification/de-qualification can only be overcome if the main emphasis is placed on basic education or a polyvalent kind, open to all and geared to reality and local needs.

Seen in such a perspective, the absurdity of isolating young people in 'learning shops' remote from community life and productive labour becomes striking. To continue defining as education the intellectual effort of digesting formal information can only lead to the mechanism, denounced by Ivan Illich (Deschooling Society 1970), whereby the more education a person 'consumes', the more he multiplies his intellectual capital and the higher he rises in the hierarchy of capitalists of knowledge - a mechanism which unfailingly entails the reconstitution of a new class pyramid, in that these major consumers of knowledge can later claim to be rendering services of great value to their society. By contrast, new knowledge acquired through daily practice in improving life and satisfying basic collective needs can be put to use at once and is therefore open to redefinition and rethinking.

By stressing the role of the local community as the basic unit in the project of achieving a people's self-organization and self-reliance, this new definition of knowledge implies a radical criticism of the state's traditional role as the dispenser of services. In other words, initiative at the base presupposes the overcoming of the dependent attitude inculcated by colonialism, which consists in waiting passively for the state to solve local problems by action from above.

The satisfaction of collective basic needs must also cease to depend on the market and the search for individual promotion must be replaced by collective efforts on a basis of cooperation and mutual aid. We have seen how, in the West, essential human activities such as food production, housing, health care, communications and transport have been captured by institutions and transformed into services/products. We have also seen how the social and technical division of labour in the West has resulted in making people more and more helpless and powerless in the face of the problems of everyday life. In the wealthy countries today everyone has to call in a specialist in order to meet his basic needs, and every specialist calls in another as soon as the problem escapes the increasingly narrow and specialized framework of his own competence. In the last analysis, everyone sells his competence or labour force at the market price in order to be able to afford the labour or competence of others.

Education can help to destroy this web of dependencies to the extent that, by a polyvalent training based on the unity of work and study, it promotes a collective reappropriation by the community of its autonomy and creative initiative. I am referring here to entirely concrete matters. At the level of every basic community, whether it be a country village or an urban neighbourhood, an infinite number of problems arise every day, ranging from the building and upkeep of dwellings to sanitary and hygienic protection measures. Let us take the example of health.

The colonial legacy has made people dependent upon the state to supply the doctors, hospitals and medicines without which, allegedly, the sick cannot be cured. Now it is obvious that in poor countries this 'assistentialist' approach, which consists in tackling the consequences of a problem (disease) by calling in an expert (the doctor) within a clearly defined context (the hospital) and making use of outside resources (medicines), can in no way alter the problem's real causes. In order to break out of the vicious circle always created by intervening after the harm has been done, one must, so to speak, steal a march on disease. And this frequently implies making thoroughgoing changes in the environment and in people's mentalities, changes that cannot be accomplished unless and until the entire population feels involved and responsible. This means that the population must be mobilized to take charge of its health, and this in turn means that it must be helped to acquire the necessary knowledge and the tools it needs in order to help itself. Such a task, in which all members of the community must participate if the enterprise is not to end in failure, is eminently educational in nature.

Moreover, it offers an excellent example of the way in which education, by de-specializing itself (i.e. by ceasing to be synonymous with formal instruction given within the sacred confines of a school), also helps to de-specialize other spheres of activity, such as health. To develop the example a little further: there is no reason why, when literacy campaigns are conducted, instructors recruited: on a voluntary basis (i.e. non-specialists) should not receive polyvalent training which will enable them to transmit some fundamental notions of sanitary education as part of the actual contents of literacy. This will facilitate the study of a series of subjects and the acquisition by the population of a knowledge it can put directly into practice. It is a prerequisite of any genuine improvement in collective health that the group acquires some understanding of how the human body works, the mechanisms of biological development, the importance of proper nourishment and adequate hygiene, etc.

Most important of all, however, is that this knowledge should lead to concerted action by the community aimed, precisely, at improving the production and distribution of food, access to water, the construction of hygienic dwellings, and so on. As people take charge of their own lives, the barriers round specialized spheres of competence tend to fall. Health is discussed within the context of learning to read and write, and this leads people to become interested in still other subjects, such as agriculture, housing, transport, and so, forth. It is important to note that such a redefinition of the very nature of knowledge and the mechanisms of its production would be tantamount to signing the death warrant of education as a specialized field, a science with a territory exclusively its own, that of the transmission of knowledge.

The very notion of education as a separate subject disappears and is dissolved in community life, the new meeting point at which previously separate activities and disciplines intersect. The traditional school cannot be the natural or favoured place for the production of the new collective knowledge, evolved and tested in the very process of improving the conditions of everyday life. Once this has been recognized, we should no longer give priority to multiplying artificial school structures which then have to be corrected and brought closer to' community life, productive labour and social activity. Let us rather reverse the order by starting from community life, productive labour and social activity, which, in their entirety, can become the permanent learning environment. I quote Patrick Rensburg; In the future: 'It is not schools that should be built, but new productive enterprises - factories and farms - to which are attached study-areas, libraries and laboratories, and a variety of communally organized services and facilities for recreation, sport and cultural pursuits.'

It is clear that we are today still a long way off from so radical a solution. It is equally certain that such a change cannot occur overnight. For one thing, it would be inconceivable without a political will capable of overcoming the weight and inertia of existing structures and getting rid of the myths which still surround neo-colonial school. Secondly, as we have already pointed such a reversal of priorities in the educational field can succeed only if it forms part of a larger process of reorganization society as a whole. And, finally, who among us - brought up as we all are in traditional education practice - could, as of now, set in motion this new system which presupposes a learning process completely different from ours?

The only way in which educators can begin to change their mentality and form a different picture of their role is by experimenting with the alternative. Here I think it is important to mention some ways in which the existing educational system in Africa could be immediately reoriented. Even if these transitional measures should not lead to a radical transformation, they may open the way to deeper changes. In a new educational perspective, nothing justifies the maintenance of the pyramidal structure of the schools system, where the stage significantly called 'primary' is simply a kind of ante-chamber to something else which the majority of students never enter. If countries with limited resources put an effort which often is beyond their means into offering access to schools to the largest number of children, the least they can expect is that the education received in these schools will be an education complete in itself.

Instead of continuing to prepare all students for an academic examination which only a minority will pass, the minimum objective should be to prepare the young for kind of life the vast majority of them are going to lead in villages and communities. To quote Julius Nyerere, during the years of basic schooling boys and girls should learn all they need to know in order to lead a happy and useful life with an agrarian society which only their own efforts can improve. This minimum objective would be far easier to attain if such ceased to be an institution turned in upon itself and isolated from the social environment. Students and teachers should be able to participate in the life of the village community by taking on work responsibilities, including some at the production level (the school ceases to be a financial burden to the

extent that produces what it needs) and by promoting, in its turn, the community's participation in the learning process.

However, even if primary education is progressively reoriented ensure a basic education for all, a very thorny problem remains be faced. How should we train the agronomists, doctors and engineers the country needs (although their role may now essentially be to support and supplement the efforts of the base) so that their training does not encourage the reappearance of a privileged elite dealing with an alien science? In other words, how do we combine the basic education open to all with the longer and more systematic education which, manifestly, can only be accessible to a small minority? What criteria do we apply in choosing this minority, and how do we organize their education that they do not become cut off from the rest of the population? How do we make sure that their skills and knowledge remain directly geared to the country's life and needs?

I can only outline a few tentative answers to these questions. The measures which could be taken to avoid the reproduction of elite of specialists belong to the sphere of politics - of which shall be speaking in connection with the social values implicit the new concept of education - and, at the same time, touch on the actual organization of so-called secondary (and even higher) education, particularly as regards their association with the countryside and productive labour. To establish a permanent link between study and work and install the new schools in the countryside are probably the best ways of ensuring that technicians will be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the country's real needs.

Such knowledge will have been well-tested by being continually to use in solving the concrete problems that arise in a rural environment. Moreover, the students' participation in the management and upkeep of the school as well as in village work and life bound to encourage the awakening of a new sense of collective responsibility and community service. The importance attached within the educational process to the acquisition of these new these values also calls for a broadening of traditional criteria of evaluation and selection of those to be given access to longer and more specialized training. The inclusion of new concepts, such as that of service to the community, among the redefined criteria for evaluation, would in turn entail major social consequences.

Thus, the initial advantage enjoyed by students from an urban: background would tend to diminish to the extent that education stopped being entirely a matter of theoretical book-learning and success was no longer measured in terms of competitive individual and intellectual performance; and, insofar as learning became associated with productive labour and community life, the children of peasant families would gain confidence and their inventiveness and creativity would have a better chance to unfold.

The Emergence of New Social Values

At a level beyond that of material production but closely associated with it, the new concept of education also implies the acquisition of new social values. All education is transmission of values: but, for a long time past, these values have been judged by their nominal content and the fact was overlooked that the very manner of their transmission and acquisition determined their implicit message. Thus, independently from its declared ideological content, the school - by virtue of its existence structure - is a carrier of certain attitudes to life, impregnated by competitiveness and selectivity, in the name of a cumulative knowledge which it defines as the only valid kind.

The alternative - an education which contributes to project of self-reliance - also carries an implicit message. Collective autonomy, creativity and solidarity cannot be learned in classroom, however excellent the teacher. Cooperative work and service to the community are the product of a daily practice which, in itself, may or may not be conducted in a spirit of autonomy, creativeness and solidarity. In other words, the manner in which a person is educated for life is in itself a learning process. Discipline acquired under duress may produce disciplined attitudes, but in reality this is submission to fear not discipline. The view of education I have outlined implies a challenge not only of the nature of knowledge, but also of the notion pedagogy, that is to say of the relationship between the teacher and the taught. Whereas under the old system the relation was structured in terms of a hierarchy based on a knowledge which the teacher was supposed to hold and the pupil was supposed receive, the new education sees knowledge as a permanent process of construction involving a horizontal relationship.

This is exact opposite of what Freire calls the 'banking' concept education (i.e., the depositing of pre-packaged knowledge,' banking practice, which blunts and dulls the learner's creativity, must yield to a genuinely reflective education leading to a continuous discovery of reality through the learner's critical involvement in real life. As education moves out of the classroom and into community life, so these changes in pedagogy will be affected in social organization. The project of self-reliance cannot feed solely on the charismatic speeches and exhortations of heads of state and their representatives. The sincere intentions of the leaders, those popular organizers who set in motion a mass of people reduced to passive dependency by centuries of colonial domination, often serve as the starting point and set the course for future developments. Thus, the liberation movements have acted as the detonators of popular awakening. But as the process continues and the masses take control of their own destinies, they stop being passive pupils obeying benevolent masters and become social groups which organize themselves in order to achieve self-determination.

Within a social organization which creates itself from the base and with the participation of the base, the relationship of the population to the state is no longer the alienated one of people subjected to an authority invested with all power and knowledge. This power, so utterly elusive in the winding corridors of bureaucracy, must be democratized through popular participation, thus creating a new political reality full of educational implications. Indeed, the management of

society itself is a formative process of inestimable value and the best possible guarantee of a popular mobilization that will not flag on the morrow of independence. The refashioning of teacher-student and ruler-ruled relationships; the opening up of the classroom and its absorption by the community; self-determination in education as part of society's, thus creating a new political reality full of educational domain exists not only in the idealistic construction of intellectuals in pursuit of alternatives to a dangerously unequal, absurd world. The trend is already visible in the historical reality of certain peoples of the Third World. It already appears on the agenda of certain countries - not as an idea, but as the practical claim of an historical era which calls for innovation.

If we mount this kind of coordinated self-help community-wide projects in our nations, I know we will succeed. Well, why are you all still sitting here? Let's get to work! Ladies and gentlemen, may I leave you with this declaration: "We succeed in life or in anything else only as we identify a single overriding objective, and make all other considerations bend to that one objective".

Your Excellencies, Honourable guests of honor, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen; respectable leaders of the African Diaspora, I thank you for your patience and interest.

Dr. Alpha Grace

Sociocriminologist, Preacher, Personal Coach, Master of Conferences, Intercultural consultant and Author.

African Center for Sociocultural Development

Case Postal 27

2035 Corcelles

Tel: 032 730 3809

www.cads.ch