

Why is Africa still so poor?



IN her two-part article entitled, "Now it is time to seek a newer world", published in The Guardian on May 26 and 27, 2008. Mrs. Feyi Soluade-George reiterated the now familiar story of the Africa's exploitation by the European Empires; initially through the heinous trans-Atlantic slave trade of Africa and then by the continent's colonisation in the name of propagating the three Cs: Christianity, commerce and civilisation. She argued that, while formal colonialism has lost political currency in today's world, a new form of economic enslavement has arisen to take its place.

This new form of colonisation is not fostered by guns but by the pens of the World Bank and IMF. I quote from Mrs. George's article: "...Today, the colonial masters are as good as gone. I mean those military, gun-totting invaders are gone. But we have new masters who are different; although they carry no guns, they are decked only in suits

and wield nothing more lethal than the pen; they are all over Africa carrying out the same expansionist mission. Only these days they bear different nomenclature and carry their assignment in the new coded language of enslavement. Many of these economic hit-men you would find in the corridors of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, London Club, the Paris Club and the huge multinational corporations".

"... They persuade countries to undertake huge projects like power generation, road construction, refineries and encourage African countries to borrow money from foreign institutions to finance these projects: Loans that several generations of Africans will never be able to pay back... This is all part of the new world order; an order which suits only a few".

Mrs. George's assessment of the imbalance in trade and economic aid policy is correct. In his acclaimed book *White Man's Burden*, William Easterly states that Africa has received \$2.3 trillion of aid in the last 60 years and has virtually nothing, by way of economic progress, to show for it. Why the yawning gap between aid receipts and economic progress? Why is Africa the only continent that became poorer in the last 30 years? Why is Africa still so poor? Mrs. George suggests that it is part of a new world order, which suits the (Western) few. Surely, the answers to such complex questions are not as simple as those she suggests: Western power play and skullduggery. Her position, which absolves Africa's entrenched elite of the blame for the state of the continent, is unfortunate.

Like the slave trade of old, the new "enslavement" that she described requires "local" accomplices. Take the example of the proposed \$80 billion power plant in Congo that she gave in her piece. If the past is anything to go by then most of that aide money will end up squandered or in the coffers of Western project consultants. Mrs. George comfortably ignores one other fact: a large chunk of the \$80 billion for the hydro electric project will also end up in the pockets of the corrupt entrenched Congolese elite.

She goes to great lengths to absolve African elite of culpability in the mismanagement of their countries' economies. According to her, the implosion of Zimbabwe was inevitable; Mr. Mugabe merely sat on a "keg of gunpowder" that predictably led to the country's economic

meltdown. This is a grotesque historical contortion that requires one to be an ostrich and bury one's head in the political sands. Her position denigrates the perseverance of ordinary Zimbabweans. No, Zimbabwe's collapse was not inevitable. Yes, Zimbabwe has a history of poisoned race relations but this did not seem to be a problem when Mugabe was courting the white votes in the early 80s and 90s. Instead, race has become a political ping-pong in Mr. Mugabe's cynical power game. The World Bank had nothing to do with it. Pray, was it the World Bank and IMF that presided over the collapse of the rule of law and institution of political violence in Zimbabwe? Is it the World Bank that tortures fellow Zimbabweans for expressing their political opinions? These depredations have a very unique African character - no World Bank help was needed.

To buttress her point on inequality, Mrs. George mentioned that it costs more to buy a pack of cocoa beverage in West Africa than in Europe, and that the reason for this price difference is some Western economic "sleight-of hand". Is it just possible that it costs more to produce a tonne of cocoa beverage in West Africa than in Europe because several home-grown problems such as poor infrastructure, unclear and sharp business practices, official corruption and epileptic power supply, all contrive to hike the cost of producing the simplest industrial goods? Maybe the West is not to blame here.

Mrs. George's analysis of gas flaring in the Niger Delta is similarly facile. To be sure, flaring of natural gas in the Niger Delta has caused untold environmental degradation, is a shame, and represents the loss of potentially billions of dollars in revenues. However, enhancing it "for home use" as Mrs. George suggests is more complex. The main reasons why natural gas has not been enhanced for "home use" are lack of a domestic market, lack of infrastructure to transport the gas to a domestic grid and cold economics; it costs much more to "use" the natural gas than to flare it. Sad but true; no Western conspiracy here.

Mrs. George writes that, "It is surprising that till now people never take note that the side that takes all the goodies, the heavier side, is always the first to tilt over. Where is Babylon and its kings? Where is the Roman Empire, where are its Caesars..." If the author suggests that no empire lasts forever, then she'd be right: No human creation can live forever. She posits that the Roman Empire fell because it took all the "goodies" from the poorer nations and tilted over. Could this be the reason why Rome "fell"? Is it possible that the Western Roman Empire, which lasted over a thousand years, fell due to internal decay? And who says the Romans fell? Don't forget that the only part of the Roman Empire which fell in 476 was the Western part. The Eastern Empire did quite well. It metamorphosed into the Byzantine Empire, which lasted until the 14th Century before the invasion of the Ottoman Turks. Even in Western Europe the Roman Empire was resuscitated as Frankish Christendom. Therefore, in total, the Roman Empire lasted over two thousand years; I'll take a two thousand-year empire anytime.

In conclusion, I could not agree more with Mrs. George that "we can do more and better in a fair and just manner" and that "events happening worldwide show that things are changing fast and we must change if we wish to survive." If we, as Nigerians, look at the emergence of the Asian Tigers and India, one thing becomes clear: they all (except South Korea) achieved rapid modernisation and wealth on their own with very little infusion of Western aid. They embraced trade, found their niche in the "global village" and developed it. None of them has the vast oil resources that Nigeria possesses yet their economies have outperformed ours. It is a message that we should take to heart.

We are in a make-or-break phase in African history. Sixty years after independence, Africa's elite has spectacularly failed to deliver on the promises of modernisation. We cannot continue to depend on or blame the West for our prosperity or lack thereof. Neither can we wait for the West to muster the collective effort to ensure a "just order". It took the West 400 years to end the trans-Atlantic slave trade, 150 years to end formal colonialism in Africa -mostly under

duress - and 50 years to turn the corner in the Cold War (which was anything but cold in its theatres of execution: Africa and Latin America). We do not have that time anymore. As the global economy becomes more integrated, Nigeria's youths are depending on us to create the economic opportunities that will keep them off the streets and retain the confidence that indeed their tomorrow's will be better than today.

It is time to stop looking for white-skinned enemies. Africa's most redoubtable enemies are not the institutions of the Western order (though they have their share of blame) situated in Washington DC and London. Instead they are African men and women, who have mortgaged their countries' futures for a villa in the south of France and/or an apartment in South Kensington. Let's start developing our own solutions to our country's challenges and borrow ideas liberally from the West when it suits us to do so.

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