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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY CESAR CHELALA

09.04.2023

Africa's Time is Now

Since the 1980's, I traveled in Africa as a public health consultant for several international agencies. Because I went to places that tourists do not dare to go, I got a unique and more real vision of the continent, one moored in poverty but also of majestic beauty and potential. How can one explain that a continent rich in natural resources and people of entrepreneurial nature is in such dire straits? Although Africans also play a role, a history of predatory colonialism has caused the continent to stagnate.

At present, U.S.'s renewed interest in Africa can lead to a better status for its population, if efforts are properly addressed to solve the continent's more pressing issues. In more than half a century, Africa has received billions of dollars in international aid, which some estimate is as much as \$1.2 trillion, distributed unevenly across the continent. This enormous sum has been tainted by paternalistic policies rather than helping the countries create strong civilian and governmental institutions, infrastructure, and develop their natural resources.

Seventy percent of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa is under the age of thirty, and over 60 percent of the unemployed are also young, although many of them work in the informal sector. Because of Africa's slow development of employment opportunities, the number of available jobs for young people is limited. Many of them are unable to find the funding needed to start a business, a situation made more difficult because almost two-thirds of those looking for jobs live in rural areas. These are some of the main challenges confronting continent officials: how to make use of Africans' talents to best develop their countries.

UNESCO and the International Labor Organization (ILO) have recommended that governments, international financial agencies, and the private sector develop policies to

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create jobs and ease youth transition from school to work. Many young people remain in poverty because of lack of jobs, and also because they lack a social safety net.

In addition to economic and employment concerns the health situation in African countries continues to be worrisome. To problems such as malnutrition and chronic diseases, one can now add the highly infectious and deadly Marburg virus. Marburg has recently killed more than 12 people from Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea, on opposite sides of the continent. Most African countries' health infrastructure —although much improved after the HIV/AIDS and Ebola epidemics— will probably be unable to contain the virus if it becomes a large-scale epidemic.

Health problems are aggravated by the scarcity of drinking water. High mortality rates in Africa arise from preventable water-borne diseases, which particularly affect infants and young children. Among them are typhoid fever, cholera, giardia, dysentery, and hepatitis A. If people in Africa were able to practice safe sanitation and hygiene, and have potable water, those diseases would not exist.

In the last two decades, China has been providing aid to several African countries. Unlike other international aid, Chinese aid has been centered in building infrastructure, including roads, schools, stadiums, and health centers. By using mainly Chinese personnel in their projects, China has a tighter control on how the funds are spent. This is a critical factor in a continent of widespread corruption where foreign aid is often squandered.

As a result of mismanagement, foreign aid to the region has not achieved the expected results. To be effective, aid must bypass corrupt governments and find local partners such as non-governmental and religious organizations with a proven track record of efficiency and honesty. In most cases, there are no mechanisms to monitor how aid money is spent. “Money from rich countries has trapped many African nations in a cycle of corruption, slower economic growth, and poverty. Cutting off the flow would be far more beneficial,” said Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian-born international economist and author with extensive knowledge of Africa.

For too many years, Africa has been a photo-op for movie and music stars, whose patronizing behavior disregard Africans' capacity for solving their own problems. Given the right conditions, Africans have the talent and knowledge to do it. After Vice-President Kamala Harris trip to Africa, the U.S. has the chance to focus its efforts to help build infrastructure vital to the progress and development of the African countries. Competition with China should be not a competition for war but for peace and progress.

Dr. Cesar Chelala is a co-winner of the 1979 Overseas Press Club of America award for the article “Missing or Disappeared in Argentina: The Desperate Search for Thousands of Abducted Victims.”

CounterPunch 07.04.2023