

MY AFRICA

by Adamson S. Muula

**Africa in the Eyes of the World**

Africa is the second largest continent on Earth. That is the fact. But how do people outside and within Africa perceive this massive continent? It is like the proverbial elephant and blind men who, when asked to describe the elephant, could only describe it in the way they perceived it. The elephant was a large wall (the body), a thick and long pipe (the trunk), piercing objects (the tasks), a large trunk of a tree (the legs), or, of course, a hill! Similar answers would be given by a number of people, this time not blind, if they were asked what they thought about Africa. For me, it is obviously the "home, sweet home."

It is not unusual to have an African country describing itself in sentimental terms. Malawi, for instance, is known as the "Warm Heart of Africa," whereas South Africa is the "Rainbow Country." Lesotho wishes to call itself "The Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho." The land of the Kingdom of Monomotapa is Zimbabwe, a once industrious country and bread basket of southern Africa nearing its sunset as it awaits another dawn.

Colonial History

The present day realities of Africa are inextricably linked to the kingdoms that ruled the continent and the disintegration of world colonial powers. The division of the lands and water bodies to the colonial powers started with the Voyages of Discovery by Vasco da Gama, and later resulted in the Scramble for Africa. This finally divided the continent amongst the French, the Portuguese, and the British. Although the Portuguese were the masters of the sea in exploration, they ended up getting only a few colonies, as opposed to the late-comers, the French and the British. That was not the only difference among the colonial powers. The Portuguese had this interesting policy of *assimilado*, where they aimed to have the natives

and the colonial masters integrated as one people. Inter-marriages were therefore not unusual across the racial divide and the natives were taught the language of Portugal. The British were different. They separated the masters and the natives. The Kings language was not for every Jim and Jack, and one had to go to a formal school in order to learn the language of England. The French were somewhat in the middle, but relatively liberal.

Then came the 20th century and a few Africans had now gone to the European and North American cities and schools and saw the way of life that the colonial masters lived back home. The Christian religion which the colonial masters had brought was also teaching about the equality of humans in the eyes of God. This kindled the African resistance struggle. So as early as during the First World War, Africa started to agitate for change. In Malawi, Reverend John Chilembwe wondered on why the native (African) and the masters were different in class or status and yet when the war broke, the native was being recruited to fight the "whiteman's war which had nothing to do with the African." He therefore organized an armed resistance, which resulted in casualties on both sides. In the meantime, the natives went to fight in German East Africa (Tanzania), Burma, Kenya, Ethiopia, and elsewhere.

The political agitation continued until Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) attained political independence from Britain in 1957. Then, almost each year, one or more African countries were granted political independence from the colonial masters. By that time, the German had lost their colonials to the victors of the World Wars.

Apartheid in South Africa

While most of the African countries were under colonial domination, the settlers, as

they were called, in South Africa had established an apartheid system, segregating whites and non-whites under the Group Areas Act. The non-whites comprised the Asians, coloureds or mixed race, and blacks. The whites were the elite, whereas the non-whites were the underclass. It was through such an arrangement that the Kingdoms Lesotho and Swaziland were left alone to be governed autonomously as exclusively black enclaves. Other "homelands" also emerged as areas for blacks. Nelson Mandela and others fought the apartheid and later landed in jail for many years. The apartheid regime was decisively destroyed in 1994 with Mr Mandela as the first democratically elected president of South Africa. This event gave birth to the multi-cultural and multi-racial (and thereby "Rainbow") country of South Africa.

What is South Africa?

I remember the time I was at medical school at Flinders University of South Australia in Adelaide. No matter how many times I told people that I came from Malawi in southern Africa, the majority always remarked that I came from South Africa, not realizing that South Africa and southern Africa, in the eyes of an African like me, are quite distinct entities. South Africa is the Republic of South Africa, whereas southern Africa is a regional block in which the Republic of South Africa is just one of the group of countries, including Malawi, Namibia, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The confusion about where is what is not only a problem for a non-African. The countries of Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are sometimes referred to as being in central Africa. But anyone who looks at the map of Africa will clearly see that the three countries mentioned are in southern (not central) Africa, and Malawi and Zimbabwe in fact qualify to be south-eastern countries. How did the central African issue come about? It is again the a British term. As the colonial explorer drew the map of Africa, they thought Nyasaland (now Malawi) and Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe) were in the central part of Africa. So the area was at the time known as British Central Africa. The real central Africa encompasses countries like Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and others.

Why sub-Saharan Africa?

Most people in their mental picture perceive Africa south of the Sahara as the real Africa. Why is this the case? I do not know. I have used the words sub-Saharan Africa just to conform, but I do not like to call any part of the continent "sub-Saharan". The Sahara is the largest sandy desert on the continent. It is barren land, and it is quite inappropriate to call sub-Saharan a huge part of the continent with all the countries as a lump sum. I have no recollection at all of any other regional block that is sub-desert.

However, the sub-Saharan idea, serves a purpose, ie, it divides Africa into Arab Africa, which some people choose not to regard as Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. The World Health Organization (WHO) has fallen into this trap since its Africa Regional Office (AFRO) excludes countries like Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, and others. This group is included into the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO).

Africa of the 21st Century

Africa is a dying land. Africa remains a virgin land of massive natural resources. But Africa is heavily burdened by debt, malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS (1-3). In southern Africa, the problems are much worse in the countries of the Southern African Development Community.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), formerly the Southern African Development Coordination Community (SADCC), was formed by independent southern African states in the 1980s, as a development and economic block that aimed in part to support the liberation struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The regional grouping now consists of the following Republics: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and the Kingdoms of Swaziland and Lesotho. The Indian Ocean island of Madagascar is expected to join SADC in 2005.

The SADC has an estimated 190-214 million people, which is about a third of the population of sub-Saharan Africa (Table 1). Illiteracy is a major problem. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mozambique, which had gone through two decades of civil war, has the highest rate of illiteracy, 60% for women and

Table 1. Selected socio-economic indicators of the Southern African Development Community (SADC)*

| Country | Human population | Urban population (%) | Life expectancy | GDP† \$US billion | Growth GDP (%) | GDP per capita (US\$) |
|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Angola | 13,895,700 | 35 | 47 | 8.31 | 17 | 598 |
| Botswana | 1,711,770 | 50 | 38 | 7.25 | 4 | 4,233 |
| Democratic Republic of Congo | 53,707,020 | Not available | 45 | 4.66 | 3 | 87 |
| Lesotho | 2,086,700 | 29 | 43 | 1.2 | 4 | 577 |
| Malawi | 10,743,330 | 15 | 38 | 1.74 | 2 | 162 |
| Mauritius | 1,212,350 | 42 | 73 | 5.5 | 4 | 4,537 |
| Mozambique | 18,438,330 | 34 | 41 | 4.23 | 10 | 229 |
| Namibia | 1,823,200 | 32 | 42 | 4.4 | 3 | 2,412 |
| South Africa | 43,580,000 | 58 | 46 | 18.28 | 3 | 4,183 |
| Swaziland | 1,088,180 | 27 | 44 | 1.66 | 2 | 1,528 |
| Tanzania | 35,181,300 | 34 | 43 | 7.18 | 6 | 204 |
| Zambia | 10,460,730 | 40 | 37 | 4.29 | 3 | 410 |
| Zimbabwe | 12,967,070 | 37 | 39 | 6.77 | -6 | 522 |

*Source: ref. 4.

†GDP – gross domestic product.

42% for men. In all of the SADC countries, female illiteracy rates are higher than that for men (4).

One measure of development that can be used to rank countries so far as development is concerned is the Human Development Index (HDI). This measure, used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) incorporates life expectancy at birth, literacy, and gross domestic product per capita. The higher the HDI ranking, ie, the smaller the number, the more developed a country or population is. In general, in countries with a low HDI ranking, annual population growth rates are at least 1.5%, less than 35% population are urban dwellers, and those aged 15 years or less outnumber those older than 65 years. The calculation of HDI ranking is an evolving issue, as parameters are introduced or discarded from year to year, so comparing the HDI must be done for the same year, following the same formula. The HDI was developed in 1990 by a Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq and has been used by UNDP from 1993.

The average HDI for the SADC region is 123. As a matter of comparison, in 2004, Norway was ranked as the number, followed by Sweden, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and Belgium. In the SADC region, only four countries have an HDI ranking below 100 among 177 countries (5). These are: Seychelles (HDI=52), Mauritius (HDI= 61), South Africa (HDI=90), and Botswana (HDI=97).

SADC Health Sector

Southern Africa is not idle. It is seeking for ways to deal with its own problems, with the support of the “international community” (an amorphous term that in many cases means one or two countries). The goal of the SADC Health Sec-

tor is to attain an acceptable standard of health for all citizens by promoting, coordinating, and supporting the individual and collective efforts of Member States. Within this goal, there are two aims: (a) to reach specific targets within the objective of “Health for All” in the 21st century by 2020 in all Member States, based on the primary health care strategy; and (b) to ensure that health care is accessible to all within each Member State’s economic reality.

In March 1998, the fourteen Members of SADC formulated and adopted Terms of Reference for the establishment of the Health Sector with twenty-three objectives. These are to: (a) identify, promote, co-ordinate, and support those activities that have the potential to influence the health of the population within the Region; (b) co-ordinate regional efforts on disaster and epidemic preparedness, mapping, prevention, and control of diseases such as malaria, measles, dysentery, polio, cholera, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases, and to develop common strategies to address non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer; (c) ensure effective utilization of human resources for health in the Region, including the harmonization of curricula for the training of health personnel and the accreditation of health professionals trained in Member States; and (d) identify the potential and need for postgraduate training and research in each country and; (e) identify bilateral and multilateral facilitating mechanisms to be used.

The low HDI in southern Africa need not remain so low. Western Europe was in a similar situation about a century ago. Many East Asian countries are progressively moving from a situation of economic dependence to productivity and com-

petitiveness on the world market. African science must flourish and take up its rightful place, if not compete at par, with the rest of the world.

Final Point

Africa is the sleeping giant continent that awaits a new day. Africa can be described as a place where more peace accords have been signed than on any other continent. How one perceives Africa really depends on where one stands. The people of Africa are not just waiting for manna from the Western heaven, but are geared to solve their problems, of course, with the support of the global village.

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