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### "Africa's imperative to determine its own future" Carlos Lopes

Number of visits: 516

Cheick Anta Diop Lecture by Carlos Lopes  
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and  
Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa

Your Excellency, President Macky Sall,  
My sister Fatima Harrack, CODESRIA President,  
My brother Ebrima Sall, CODESRIA Executive Secretary,  
Colleagues from the CODESRIA fraternity,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
A few weeks ago, on my way from Dire Dawa to the historical city of Harar, in eastern Ethiopia, I came across a minivan that had an intriguing message on the rear window. It read as follows: "If you don't see my mirrors, I can't see you". This funny message put me on a thinking tailspin, as I realized what a wonderful metaphor it was for our continent's current moment.

Day in, day out, we struggle to contain any bad news that might perturb a fresher, robust narrative that will reaffirm the new Africa. It is sometimes a thankless task when confronted with the sceptical eyes of so many makers of mainstream public opinion. It is, nevertheless, a task that no Ebola, Boko Haram, bad electoral process or commodity price downfall should discourage us from accomplishing. It has taken too long for us to regain a sense of urgency about constructing a common future. This is not new. But it requires renewed agency, as articulated well in the jubilee celebration of Africa's mother institution, the African Union.

Many still don't see us because their mirrors are hidden. And when they do it is through their bias and constructed narrative. From post modernity to post-colonialism we seem to be trapped in a recycled spin of misperceptions and misconceptions.

Africans, on the other hand, can only move ahead or overtake my metaphoric minivan, if they make sure that others see and feel what they are up to, and are aware of what they consider to be imperative.  
That is way I thought to honor Cheick Anta Diop by reminding us all of his impatience, his profligacy and his determination to tell the story from different eyes, from a different mirror in fact!

I believe the construction of Africa's future will obviously benefit from Africans' own actions. That by itself, however, does not necessarily mean it would be driven by Africans. We know from our own past and from universal History that there is no causal effect between the desires of a given spatial unit and its inhabitants and the primacy of their agency.

The nuanced difference between being "part of" and "being the driver of" the transformation of one's reality is indeed what matters. After so much suffering and so many missed opportunities, the time has come for Africa to claim its future.

I can see three imperatives that justify a call for action: a historical imperative, a development imperative and a moral imperative. The latter is probably the less obvious for this audience, since morality is a transient category, subject to more interpretations than mother pie. Still it can be a mobilizing concept if circumscribed to key elements that are easy to grasp.

Colleagues,

The roots of contemporary pessimism or scepticism about Africa's prospects are old. Suffice to say that during the European Renaissance, many authors and thinkers contributed to firming up various papal bulls that gave the right for colonization to the explorer Kings; all the way to the diminishing portraying of blacks in the works of famous painters such as Pigafetta, Rubens, Velázquez or Rigaud; the depiction of the region in the still-used Mercator scale maps; or the philosophical construct that Egypt was detached from the rest of the continent. Hegel, the German philosopher, captured the essence of the message by proclaiming that Africans had no history before the arrival of the Europeans. Unfortunately this reductionism was not only formulated by Europeans. From the Ottoman Empire, to Arabian thinkers and Asian explorers the same alterity thinking prevailed for long stretches of History.

The spread of slavery, the other historical denial, fragmented African identities, defined with ethnic classification and physical anthropology which dealt with diversity as if it was an entomological challenge. These were some of the dire consequences of such contempt.

African scholars have fought hard against such simplistic views. We are familiar with the vocal outbursts of Anta Diop in this regard. In a previous occasion amongst you, in Maputo in 2010, I explored at length how the likes of Anta Diop, Amílcar Cabral and Mário de Andrade fought the fight of their day.

For this audience what followed during the last quarter of the 19th century, until the independence era of the 1960s, is quite familiar. The response African liberation movements provided is well celebrated. Africans have shown over the last five decades an agency that has ridden the continent from the shackles of brutal exploitation and discrimination. At a given moment, indeed in the 1960s, they became celebrated leaders of a new dawn. The celebration was, however, in most cases, short lived.

Edward Said (2000) developed in the 1982 the "travelling theory", since then amply anthologized. He argued that theories are developed in a specific historical and social context and when time passes and they move from their points of origin they lose their rebelliousness and become dehistoricized, domesticated and tamed in their new location of space or time. Twelve years later he revised slightly this interpretation accepting there is a possibility a theory can be reinterpreted, and in some sort re-energized.

The importance of this theory to explain what happened to the revolutionary ideals of the independence movements is clear. Frantz Fanon was the first to elaborate on the possibility of a shift, after the main contradiction that mobilized African nationalists once settled with independence, would alter the power balance. Cabral also added his interpretation of a petit bourgeois suicide, in fact a sophisticated metaphor for the inevitability of a travelling theory interpretation.

It is time Africans admit the many repercussions from having celebrated too quickly some historical achievements, as if they predicted a glorious future. If in 2013 in Addis Ababa there was a pause for reflection, it was because too much celebration makes one dizzy.

If we grow, have less conflicts, expand democratic processes, increase women's participation, claim more control over our own resources, we are fine, aren't we?

No, we are not, and one good demonstration of it is the fact that the pessimistic and sceptical view prevails, outside and in many instances inside Africa. That is the reason we have a historical imperative to change not just our reality but also the perceptions about our reality!

Let me justify further the need for a so called historical imperative.

While assessing Africa's current risks most analysts zero on the pervasive nature of conflict, slowness of the continent's integration into globalization and the quality of its institutions. It is not necessarily presented in this way, but behind most arguments, such as quality of democracy, corruption or "tribalism", we can detect these threads.

A quick historical background check will bring us to the reality of state building in other regions, particularly in Europe, that have now embraced cosmopolitanism, and its cousin globalization (Sen, 2006).

The transition from medieval to modern Europe was long and conflict-ridden. It was characterized by three interconnected dimensions: establishment of a modern state, secularism and separation from the Popes influence, and the integration of economic spaces. These three dimensions created the need for new economic rules in geographically identifiable units and the introduction of geopolitics in the relations between such entities (Gomes Cravinho, 2002).

The Catholic Church Reform and then the Counter-Reform blew up the idea of a centralized Christian authority. The consequences were quite revolutionary since it meant in all layers of influence a move from decentralized forms of authority -exercised by the clerics and nobles- to a new centralized state that could only grow by imposing secular rules, and separate the state from the Church. A similar pattern is observable in many other parts of the world that experienced equivalent transitions. This emerging political structure needed recognition from equivalent others.

At the genesis of the Westfalian state, are the treaties celebrated in that city in 1648. They marked the recognition of sovereignty based on principles quite different from previous forms of political legitimacy. There is no need of revisit the full spectrum of developments that ensued to realize that the principle of sovereignty was controversial, provoked many wars, including two across the globe, but end up imposing itself in the form of what we call now international community, with its myriad of international organizations.

The emergence of current global governance mechanisms, the body of existing international law, and indeed regional institutions has their foundations on the Westfalian state.

All entities that, as late comers, integrated the established order imposed on the aftermath of two World Wars found the landscape of international relations defined. All they wanted was to be part of it and claim their share through the recognition of their sovereignty. This is still the case, but centripetal forces are not helping. The erosion of sovereignty is the new normal with international treaties and agreements calling for transnational and global types of intervention. Perhaps one of the most remarkable developments of the last two decades has been the proclivity of the "international community" to intervene in different countries with social and political rights justifications that go way beyond the humanitarian concepts of the 1950s (Rao, 2010).

Every conflict in Africa that relates to the definition of territory or is trying to address the issue of legitimacy or lack of it by a central authority is in fact revisiting the checkered history of the sovereignty principle. A current case in point would be Burundian government challenging interference from others on what it considers its internal affairs; or religiously motivated or justified movements fighting for geographical space and independence from central authority in Nigeria, Mali or Libya.

Responses from African institutions have been short term in nature, with scarce analysis of the deep rooted causes motivating the conflicts. This is partly explained by the desire for Africa to be perceived as compliant with international order, so it can move fast into the catching up mode that characterizes the current stage of its international relations.

A broader view and historical insight would call for a comparison with other regions evolution and historical record. It could then be demonstrated that, unfortunately, war has played a role in the success of super powers, war has regulated conflicts in the long run, and has indeed been the tool for many states to consolidate their authority over their territory or in relation to their neighbors. How do we replace that past conflict-resolution difficult reality with today's pressures for peaceful conflict resolution approaches, is no different from how you industrialize when every other region has done it already in their terms and what is left is a no easy ladder to climb and catch up.

It is against this background that we hear in Africa, as elsewhere, the call for a cosmopolitan view of the world. Cosmopolitanism is a strengthened western formulation of secularism. The origin of the word alone - from the Greek *cosmos* and *polis*, signifying the wide and the particular forms of interaction and knowledge - tell us how sophisticated a concept it is. Cosmopolitanism presupposes a desire to construct alliances and amplify community relationships by embracing diversity and expanding at a global scale. It is an ambiguous attempt to reconcile universal values with the unique realities that subjects construct in specific historical and cultural contexts (Ribeiro, 2003).

The ambiguity extends to the way it has to translate secularism in an environment where international institutions format rules around individual rights, lessening the community and larger group interpretation of rights (Ribeiro, 2003). Without us necessarily linking it with the reality of conflicts or, to our disappointment, with a hypothetical diminishing political agency of Africans in the world stage, the truth is that cosmopolitanism is a source of tension.

Globalization is based on interpretations of the cosmopolitanism foundations. According to Pryker we are dealing with the tension between general and particular, the former being expressed through globalization and the later through resurgent nationalism (2009). I would refine by adding religiously motivated contestation as well. "Try as we might, binaries, oppositions, perceive contradictions, call them what you will, are difficult things to escape from as they organize our thoughts and allow us to think through problems. The real problem with globalization versus national dichotomy is that it can too easily be used by those who are sceptical about globalization. That is because it is easy enough to show that globalization has little significant impact on the resilience of nationalism" (Pryker, 2009).

The pan-African ideology, constructed first by the African diaspora, has remained a strong anchor for the continent's common vision. It is a concept that has travelled well, with its ambiguities not disturbing a common ambition and a common reference to the recent past. It has been reinterpreted many times, if not re-energized. But we all know its limitations when it comes to dealing with the complexity of cosmopolitanism.

The adjustment required by Africans to integrate the mainstream international relations exercise a pull factor that has proven more solid than the desire to defend a joint, common African agency in all that matters.

African states are more Westfalian than pan-African. And the implications of this simple observation are daring for this feeds into how Africans sense history, how they will be capable or not of making their own history an imperative for transformation and a common prosperous future.

Colleagues,

There is an accepted principle that ownership is central to the success of any enterprise undertaken by *Homo sapiens*. Ownership is essential to overcome the problems of agency in any strategy, programme or project that requires implementation.

If Africa does not take ownership of its own development trajectory, then either others will do so or, worse still, the future of the continent will be left to the vagaries of chance. Africa must avoid the dangers and pitfalls inherent in adopting received paradigms wholesale. It cannot continue to fall prey to different and sometimes ulterior motives of some actors on the international scene, be they Governments, international organizations, multinational corporations or even well-intentioned international non-governmental organizations.

For Africa to determine its own future, the thinking underpinning its political, economic and social development must come from the continent and its diaspora. Of course, this is a contentious point in the sense that the generation or use of knowledge should not be constrained by geographical or indeed psychological barriers. After all, ownership of ideas is nonsensical. What matters in fact is ownership of a different kind since all ideas, learning and knowledge are welcomed, no matter where they come from.

The experience of structural adjustment programmes in Africa has shown that there are merits in policy flowing from the indigenization of knowledge. Many induced frameworks displayed great ignorance about the state of African economies and their institutional underpinnings.

What is perhaps of even greater concern is that while African countries were struggling to 'get prices right', countries in East Asia were doing the precise opposite and obtaining stellar results in economic transformation. Thus, while the late 1980s and 1990s came to be known as Africa's lost decades, the East Asian economies were becoming manufacturing powerhouses which created employment and improved social conditions for their people. They also became incredible exporting machines that took great advantage of unilateral trade liberalization and concomitant de-industrialization in Africa. In other words, countries that have been successful in terms of development determined their own future.

If Africans do not occupy the policy space vacated in the recent past, thanks to the various crises that shook the pillars of the financial system and facilitated the emergence of new South engines of growth, they may not have another chance. This makes the case for a development imperative.

Colleagues,

It is vital for Africa to determine its own also future because of the responsibility that the current generation must have to future generations. That is the essence of a social contract.

If current trends remain the same, Africa is projected to have the most youthful population in the world within at least fifty years. It would certainly be wrong - given the current opportunities of above average growth - to bequeath the legacy of a laggard continent to future generations.

This becomes even more unconscionable if we consider that we are using up the mineral wealth and natural resources of the continent and its oceans, at a very fast rate. As the rest of the world gears up to adapt to mega trends arising from demographic, technological and environmental shifts, it is imperative that our generation should set Africa on a track of sustained and sustainable development.

Fortunately the megatrends favor Africa: starting with a demographic dividend with a youthful population going to become the largest workforce in the world by 2040, at a time when the majority of the planet will be ageing fast; a burgeoning middle class already responsible for, like it happen in other parts of the world, higher growth patterns based on internal consumption; the fastest urbanization process in History; home to huge natural resources needed in the future to power green and blue economies; availability of technological platforms that allow frugal innovation with spectacular leapfrogging potential.

Building on such megatrends it is possible to claim ownership at a level that has escaped Africa before. Ownership and a sense of inter-temporal responsibility are, however, not enough for Africa to determine its own future. Vision is also required. This is quite easily demonstrated from the sphere of private business, where second generations have inherited the family business and run it aground because they lack the vision and entrepreneurship of the founders.

I should make it very clear at this stage that Africa has not lacked visionaries. This continent has also had its share of frameworks which in many ways were attempts to encapsulate a vision for its future, such as the Monrovia Declaration, Lagos Plan of Action, the Abuja Treaty and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The challenge all along has been that the visions were not accompanied by continental frameworks, but were instead implemented at the national level.

Similarly, as its name implies, a document like the Lagos Plan of Action was not intended as a vision document. Thus, while it contained uplifting language about self-reliance, it was not underpinned by an all-encompassing vision, a financial framework and lacked specifics. More critical, however, is that it was not given the opportunity to be implemented due to competing and perhaps more powerful external forces that imposed a different pathway for Africa's development. That world view saw the African state - and its primary tool of planning - as being at the very root of the economic problems facing the continent. The response therefore was to roll back the state, abandon planning and get prices right!

The structural adjustment years were a season of anomie (Jolly, 2009) with the dissolution of the post-colonial social contract, the deviation from the industrialization path and the catastrophic metamorphose of fragile state institutions.

Is this time around any different?

Following the 2008/2009 financial debacle, it became clear that the response to economic crisis, and indeed to development challenges, had to be more nuanced and diverse. Blueprints with universal ambition seem to have died. It has been as if a purification of a certain form, that blinded it from the masses, finally came to an end.

Said, in his last essay, precisely about late style, mentions two privileges of maturity: an absolute refusal to be caught unprepared, and a distinct, perfect mastery of form, thanks to a lifetime of efforts (2007). The 2008-2009 financial crises, the deepest economic contraction since World War II, demonstrated that the purity of form, or in the economic sphere, a model, was a disappointment. Success was closer to Keynesian than Chicagoan boy's theories. What the Keynesians and their East Asian adherents had known all along about the positive and mutually reinforcing role of states and markets suddenly became clear to all and sundry. For its part, Africa weathered the storm of the global crisis better than most other regions; and the narrative shifted from that of a 'hopeless continent' to that of 'Africa rising'.

Africa has in fact been riding a good wave. Average growth of 5 per cent, increased fiscal space, an all time high reserves, buoyant expansion of the service sector, particularly the financial ones, improved economic governance, declining inflation (already in single digits), sharp overall external debt as a percentage to GDP (indeed better than any European country or Japan), fastest improvement in the indexes for easy of doing business or FDI attractiveness. The list goes on.

Africa has nevertheless been lagging behind when it comes to structural transformation of its economies. Perhaps the most chilling observation is to say manufacturing value addition during the last two decades has gone down as a percentage of GDP. That means we are not industrializing at the level commensurate to the job market requirements.

With the world record for low agricultural productivity and widespread informality in the services sector there is no miracle in sight. Dependency on natural resources is obvious. But even there Africa is moving far too slowly in the mastering of value addition and negotiating capacity necessary to shift the balance in its favor, explaining huge losses and systemic challenges.

The form purified in East Asia, as late style, is not yet common in Africa. That explains disparaging poverty indicators and unequal societies with the burden on woman

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