

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT – A GOLDEN KEY TO UNLOCK AFRICA’S POTENTIAL



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1. Introduction

“Development is not about capital accumulation. It is about knowledge accumulation. If you think about development as knowledge accumulation, the way you conceive a solution to your challenges is totally different” Dr Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, NEPAD Agency of the African Union.

“The control of knowledge is the crux of tomorrow’s worldwide struggle for power in every human institution.” Alvin Toffler

This presentation will argue that the effective harnessing and application of knowledge is the key to unlocking Africa’s potential; that developing countries in Africa need to acquire and effectively manage knowledge relevant to national and local institutions to ensure that they are able to successfully execute their mandates. The transfer of such knowledge is particularly vital for nations with a chronic lack of existing skills and resources. The NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) Agency of the African Union has therefore argued that Africa requires a new vision that incorporates “an intelligent blend of the body of knowledge on the continent, coupled with ingenious methods of programming and delivery” (NEPAD).

This presentation has largely been informed by numerous knowledge management interventions we have been engaged with across Africa since 2005. The most pertinent being work we have done for the African Union Commission, the NEPAD Agency and many of its programmes, such as the gender and agriculture programmes.

2. The Development Agenda for Africa

The paradox of Africa is that while endowed with immense natural and human resources as well as great cultural, ecological and economic diversity, it remains largely underdeveloped. Africa is still hampered by a colonial legacy which has left behind weak extractive institutions. The continent is challenged, amongst other factors, by extremely high poverty levels, low education levels, poor health care, malnutrition and lack of food and nutritional security, high incidences of gender-based violence, poor infrastructure, political instability, corruption, civil unrest and war. The majority of the countries

classified by the United Nations as least developed in the world are in Africa¹. It is therefore clear that numerous development strategies adopted over past decades have failed to yield the expected results. This could be attributed to inadequate “*political and economic institutions*” as argued by the renowned economists Acemoglu and Robinson².

Nevertheless, since the start of the new millennium average economic growth across Africa has been stronger than the global growth rate³. Real output growth is estimated to have increased 3.6 percent in 2017 and according to the African Development Bank it is projected to accelerate to 4.1 percent in 2018 and 2019⁴. Among the growth drivers has been the worldwide demand for commodities that power the economies of developed countries, while political and economic reforms in some countries have paved the way for a growth in foreign investment. Urbanisation and a growing middle class have boosted consumerism and expanding mobile phone and internet penetration has stimulated the services sector. The economic optimism of the past two decades has, however, been somewhat tempered by a combination of negative factors⁵. These include a worldwide decline in commodity prices; the slowdown and rebalancing of China’s economy; climate change leading to widespread drought, especially in the east and the south; ineffective resource management and insecurity and instability in the Horn of Africa.

But has this growth, albeit at a slower pace, stemmed poverty and inequality? While extreme poverty has declined, 35% of the population in Africa, or 395 million people, are still trapped in poverty. According to a 2016 report of the United Nations Development Programme⁶, African countries rank among the lowest on the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index, while 2018 statistics produced by the World Economic Forum show a similar ranking on their Inclusive Development Index (IDI). It is thus clear that African countries have not done enough to reduce inequality and turn growth into broad-based economic development. This growth furthermore took place in the context of limited economic diversification and structural change.

Upscaling Africa’s industrial base is therefore vital to economic transformation and job creation. A key lesson is that African countries must wean themselves from a reliance on natural resources and prioritise diversification and value-added export production. In this context, infrastructure development is critical: according to the World Bank, poor infrastructure can reduce productivity by up to 40%.

The African Union has therefore recommended that to ensure sustainable economic development African countries should stimulate domestic investment, diversify exports, deepen rural-urban linkages, provide inclusive social development and education, offer effective social protection, and create stronger institutions by real regional integration, better mobilisation of domestic resources and ongoing improvement in political and economic governance.

These actions should aim to meet the development targets set by the African Union’s Agenda 2063, a strategic framework adopted in January 2015 by the member states of the African Union. The Agenda

¹United Nations Development Programme: Human Development Report 2016

² Acemoglu, Daron & James A. Robinson. 2012. *Why nations fail: the origins of power, prosperity and poverty*. London: Crown Publishers.

³ In considering this growth trajectory the very low base that most African countries started with should be taken into consideration, another indication of the colonial legacy that left a wake of weak political and economic institutions.

⁴ 2018 African Economic outlook, African Development Bank

⁵AUC/OECD. 2018. *Africa’s Development Dynamics 2018: Growth, jobs and inequalities*. AUC, Addis Ababa/OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁶ United Nations Development Programme. Human development report, 2016. Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index.

provides a framework to facilitate the socio-economic transformation of the African continent over the next 50 years and seeks to accelerate the implementation of continental initiatives for growth and sustainable development. It is closely aligned to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that was adopted by the member states of the United Nations in September 2015.

However, the challenge for most African countries is to achieve qualitative rather than quantitative integration with the global economy. The world we have known is rapidly being transformed by globalisation and technical innovation and this process of change is occurring at an ever-incremental rate. This has affected all spheres of life and we need to seriously consider how we will respond to global shifts, changes and trends. We have to develop new ways of working, improve interaction with our constituencies, and rethink strategies to become more successful and sustainable. This requires new, innovative approaches and a fundamental change in the mind-set of leaders, governments, regions and continental structures. An important factor has been the realisation that knowledge is critical to success, that it is our most valuable asset and thus must be effectively managed. Governments in sub-Saharan Africa must be convinced that knowledge should be leveraged to benefit all citizens and that knowledge management practices should be pro-actively implemented.

3. Economics and Knowledge / Information

Economists traditionally asserted that growth depended upon three factors: land, including all natural resources, capital, including tools and equipment, and labour. To develop it was thought necessary for producers to increase use of one or more of these factors. Historians of economics have latterly concluded that land and capital have no significant long-term effects on economic growth: instead the *improved* use of labour leads to sustained development. This means finding better ways of working: “working smarter” rather than “working more”⁷. Du Plessis further notes that successful specialisation and co-operation requires information and a willingness to share and use it. Information and knowledge have a key role to play in “working smarter” and are considered by some economists to be an additional factor in production⁸. Tang⁹ makes two important assertions: first, when seeking to understand economic growth, knowledge should be understood as the sum total of our understanding of society and nature, rather than technological knowledge alone. Second, when seeking to understand economic growth, knowledge should be treated as a genuine independent production factor, rather than an exogenous residual in the production function.

4. The Role of Knowledge Management

We therefore argue that the success of nations and organisations depends on good knowledge leadership. Leaders need to understand the timeless value of knowledge in enabling individuals, organisations and nations to become responsive and effective players in the growing knowledge

⁷Du Plessis, S. 2010. *How can you be a Christian and an economist? The meaning of the Accra Declaration for today*. Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers 02/10. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, Department of Economics.

⁸Engelbrecht, H-J. 2007. The (un)happiness of knowledge and the knowledge of (un)happiness: Happiness research and policies for knowledge-based economies. In *International Conference Policies for Happiness, June 14-17, 2007*

⁹Tang, Shiping. 2005. Knowledge as a production factor: Towards a unified theory of economic growth.; <http://iaps.cass.cn/UploadFile/2005102203439560.pdf>

economy. It is imperative that they develop the ability to recognize, effectively organise and manage, and ultimately apply knowledge as *the* principle resource. This knowledge-based perspective suggests that sustainable success comes predominantly from constructing and consolidating distinctive resources, capabilities and know-how.

We contend that the effective harnessing and application of knowledge is the key to unlocking Africa's potential; and that developing countries in Africa need to acquire and effectively absorb knowledge relevant to national and local institutions so that they can successfully execute their mandates. The transfer of such knowledge is particularly vital for nations with a chronic lack of existing skills and resources. The new vision for Africa therefore requires "an intelligent blend of the body of knowledge on the continent, coupled with ingenious methods of programming and delivery" (NEPAD).

This will, according to April and Izadi¹⁰ only happen if "leaders are adaptive, and have the ability to perceive, act and think differently, using information, knowledge and wisdom to do so" and that organisations and nations will have to deal with two knowledge-based streams: exploration and exploitation. Exploration relates to looking for new and better ways of working and refers to the flow of learning from the individual to the collective organisation; exploitation, in turn, relates to the more efficient use of existing resources where the flow of learning is from the collective organisation to the individual.

The knowledge and information deluge of today and the growing complexity of all factors and policies relating to development in Africa has made effective knowledge management essential to the future success of the continent, its regional economic communities and individual countries. There is a clear need to improve the strategic use of data and information of relevance to developmental initiatives and to enhance knowledge creation and sharing in this field. Such knowledge, information and data should be systematically mapped, collected, collated, analysed, and quality-checked and then made sense of to underpin evidence-informed policymaking. The ability to leverage knowledge and promote knowledge and information exchange among experts is therefore fundamental to the success of Africa. This requires effective systems for storage and dissemination of knowledge and information.

One solution is to develop Knowledge Management, Sharing and Monitoring Platforms in Africa¹¹. Related to such a solution is the development of knowledge hubs¹² or centres that will bring together policymakers, researchers and practitioners to co-create answers to policy questions, make new sources of knowledge available, and better align research and practice with policy needs. Knowledge hubs typically provide an environment that fosters both high internal and external networking and knowledge sharing among all stakeholders

There is further a need for the development of knowledge products to inform policymakers on and to effectively disseminate knowledge and information across Africa. It is important to turn data into knowledge to improve policy-making. There is a lack of documentation and communication of knowledge generated within the African continent and it has been stated that '*the largest African library is in the grave*' – the stark metaphor for the lack of knowledge retention, specifically tacit knowledge, on the

¹⁰ April, K & Izadi, F.A. 2004. Knowledge management praxis. Cape Town: Juta.

¹¹A Knowledge Management and Communication System for the EU-Africa Research and Innovation Partnership on Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture, CAAST-Net Concept note, 2017

¹²Evers, Hans-Dieter, 2008. Knowledge hubs and knowledge clusters: Designing a knowledge architecture for development. MPRA Paper 8778, University Library of Munich, Germany

continent. Knowledge generation needs to be enhanced and effective knowledge sharing mechanisms need to be implemented.

5. Conclusion

We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.

Edward Osborne Wilson

Knowledge management can play an important role in supporting the implementation of African development frameworks and programmes. Effective knowledge management will ensure that all knowledge and information pertinent to a programme is collected and shared, that important role players are connected to promote knowledge sharing and that collaboration is enhanced among stakeholders.

While Sub-Saharan Africa has many structural, economic and societal problems to overcome, it also has vast potential if governed effectively. This huge potential can only be unlocked if there is a shift from concentrating on the crude exploitation of natural resources to a recognition of the value of knowledge and information and the urgent need to leverage the social and intellectual capital of African citizens.

It is our firm conviction that the goals outlined in Agenda 2063 can only be achieved through the effective management and sharing of Africa's knowledge base and as Chomsky is reputed to have said:

"If anything's going to happen, it is going to be through mutual aid, solidarity, community, and a collective commitment to making changes. That's always been the case in the past, and there's no reason to think it will be different in the future".