

Symposium on Sustainable Development and Governance in Africa

“Governance and Enhancement of Parliament”

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Japan Institute of International Affairs

Sustainable development requires continuous multi-phased policy implementation, but today I would like to emphasize one measure -- the enhancement of African parliaments in the context of promoting good governance.

First, let me say a few words on governance and economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa. Although some positive growth is registered in recent years, in many countries in the region throughout 1980s and 90s, the standard of living is declining, the income gap is widening and the proportion of the population below the poverty level is increasing. The situation is far from the target of reducing the people living in extreme poverty by half between 1990 and 2015. The assistance from the developed countries to this region is significantly higher than that to other developing regions. Roughly speaking, the ODA from all sources to the region reached 10% of GDP during the 1990s (at the peak of the Marshall Plan after World War II, it was 2.5 percent of GDP).

What, then, are the reasons why many countries in the region are not able to place themselves on the track to higher and sustainable growth? There is no shortage of literature explaining their poor economic performances. In fact, African economic development has lately become a rich gold mine for development economists. A long list of reasons for poor economic performance has been offered in their studies, such as a worsening of the terms of trade due to heavy dependence on exports of primary products, export substitution policies, a series of weather-related disasters, poor education bases, weak investments and poor financial institutions, rapid population increases, etc. When one exhausts all these internal and external explanations, a wide area is left unexplained. I believe this “unexplained or unexplainable” blank holds the answer that politicians, economists and policy advisers have been averse to address until lately (the bottom line is the way in which the political system is being managed or the polity of a country). The critical factor is poor political governance. If I may borrow an expression from the report by the Secretary General of the United Nations “The Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa,” the term is “a winner-take-all political system.” Power controls the access to wealth, resources, prestige, and social mobility. A group or an individual in power distributes resources to specific vested interest groups. In other words, the patron-client system in extreme form has been

operating in many countries. Such a system is essentially a case of personal rule rather than the rule of law. Such system saps national resources for consumption instead of investment for growth, and creates a dependency mentality among people instead of self-reliance. Powerful political leaders dominate the policy making process, discouraging initiatives from technocrats and thereby inhibiting the growth of a competent bureaucracy. Transparency, accountability and participation are not features of many political and economic decision making processes, nor are systems of checks and balances sufficiently functional among and within the three branches of government. In short, I would state that poor political governance is one of major factors responsible for limiting growth in many countries in this region.

Since the end of the Cold War, most sub-Saharan countries have undertaken accelerated political reform, shifting from authoritarian regimes to democratic, participatory governments. In many countries elections have been carried out under a multi-party system, and peaceful transition of power has taken place in several countries. A new generation of politicians who share with us the same democratic values and political principles are emerging in many countries. There are, however, cases of continuing serious political instabilities created by power struggles among political elites and on-going armed conflicts in sub-Saharan countries, but it is clear that democratization is an irreversible political trend.

Democracy is a political system based on the rule of law, transparency, accountability and the participation of people in the process of decision making as well as a political philosophy based on respect for human rights. Multiparty elections alone do not make a democratic system complete. An elected government means an accumulation of power, which is just one side of democracy. Another side is the exercise of constraints on the use of power. Even after credible multi-party elections there are cases where all-powerful executive branches dominate the political scene with a conspicuous lack of checks and balances within the government.

As Winston Churchill remarked, democracy is the worst political system except all those tried in the past. As systems go, it is a very fragile system that needs constant care by people. It swings from right to left and left to right like a pendulum. No country has reached the pinnacle of democracy. Obviously it is an evolving process.

Our democratic political system in Japan is also new and going through constant adjustments. Democratic reforms in African countries have just begun and I am sure they

are going to experience many ups and downs in future. However, NEPAD and other policy statements by African leaders indicate that peace, security and good governance are preconditions for sustainable growth.

This reform process must succeed for the benefit of African people as well as for a more stable and prosperous world. Programs to promote the process of democratization cover a wide range of topics, including the election process, the strengthening of judiciaries, parliaments, and local governments, the building of political parties and institutions for basic human rights, the establishment of responsible civil societies, and civil education. No one institution can guarantee good governance in a country. People and various institutions must work together to maintain democracy. As such, all these areas related to democratization deserve high priority. However, I would like to propose here activities to strengthen the parliamentary functions of legislation, representation and oversight because parliament is and must be the central institution that serves as the bridge between the people and the state and because it occupies the central position in good governance. The efforts must be undertaken primarily by African countries and, if any assistance from donors is required, these donors should also place a high priority on such assistance (in fact, various bilateral assistance institutions and many NGOs have been promoting a wide range of programs in those fields).

Many assistance projects and programs have been directed at various administrative offices to strengthen their capacity. In fact, it is difficult to find a government department that has not received any support from donor countries. What have been the final results? There are large numbers of successful individual assistance projects, but their impact on the overall economic and social development in sub-Saharan African countries has been quite limited as witnessed by the declining per capita income. The Tokyo Plan of Action from TICAD II and NEPAD propose a long list of programs that must be undertaken by both African countries and donor countries. Of these, I would like to emphasize cooperation programs to strengthen democratic political development. I strongly believe this is one of the high priority areas for making sustainable development possible.

When we limit ourselves to the measures that enhance the function of the parliament and the capacity of parliamentarians, five general areas can be identified.

First, there is enhancement of the fields of specialization of parliamentarians. Parliamentarians represent their constituencies, which requires their attention on various

social and economic problems, and they are required to cope with other diverse national and international issues. When they are assigned to specific committees, knowledge on specific fields is required. Parliamentarians have to be generalists over a wide range of subjects as well as specialists in a specific subject such as evaluation of the national budget. Many parliamentarians are not highly trained specialists. They need constantly to update their knowledge to function effectively, especially in a time of globalization of world economic activities, rapid development of technologies, and new information. Systematic learning opportunities for current and special issues may be provided within the parliamentary secretariat.

Second, we have training in policy formulation and evaluation. Parliamentarians prepare bills and evaluate proposed bills by the executive branch, and engage in on-going policy implementation. Greater ability to deal with participatory policy formulation and evaluation among parliamentarians would increase the transparency and accountability of the legislature.

Third, there is the capacity to conduct research into current issues. Information can be provided by the administration but parliaments have to maintain an adequate capacity to conduct their own independent research for not only drafting bills but also for debating policies on the floor. Parliament may expand their existing library facilities to assist these research activities. Also, the existing legal procedures may be reviewed to determine their benefits and shortcomings in the context of strengthening the democratic structure of legislation.

Fourth, legal training is needed. Suffice it to say, parliaments are legislative organs and each member must be trained in the legal aspects of legislation. Each parliament has developed its own legal procedures for various phases of legislation, and individual members may need additional training in legal procedures.

Fifth, we have the effective engagement of legislatures and people they represent. The capacity and strength of a legislator is ultimately determined by his or her ability to represent his/her constituency. This requires efforts from two sides. On the legislature's side, information must be provided on the role and workings of the legislature and of political parties under the democratic system. On the side of the constituency or civil society, certain skills such as information gathering and analysis, advocacy, and monitoring of legislation must be developed. After all, the dialogue between the elected and the represented must be effectively maintained. I would like to add that

parliamentary staff are indispensable in the modern legislative system. Parliamentarians alone cannot adequately manage the complex and overwhelming legislative undertakings. Enhancing the capacity of parliamentary staff in those general areas is an essential part of this proposal.