

African Foreign Affairs Dialogue With the U.S.

Education for Democracy

By Dr. Gwendolyn Mikell

At no time in the past has it been more possible and more important for the United States to engage African countries in foreign policy dialogues, which is an important element in education for democracy. Prior to the 1990s, the opportunities to do so did not really exist, because African countries were still caught up in the webs of neo-colonial linkages or cold war politics. African countries were also focused on economic restructuring and stabilization according to the prescriptions elaborated by the international financial institutions, and had little space for consideration of foreign policy concerns. However, the end of the cold war and the unfortunate American 'retreat from Africa'¹ coincided, leaving in their wake unresolved conflicts born of the colonial and cold war competitions. While these conflicts wreaked havoc in fragile African states, they also provided the impetus for African countries to begin dialogues with each other about how to contain the chaos, and this triggered off a new phase in African thinking about conflict resolution on the Continent. The new capabilities for African regional peacekeeping through ECOMOG were born of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts, or the need for it was recognized as a



result of the Congo and Great Lakes crises flared. These conflicts pushed first the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and then the African Union (AU) to think creatively about mechanisms to engage the continent in security collaborations as well as other kinds of development initiatives like NEPAD. There is no doubt that Africans are now convinced that they must engage each other in policy dialogues for the good of the Continent.

The new challenge is to encourage foreign policy dialogues between African countries and western powers

like the United States.² In the United States, there are active constituencies like those that backed the passage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (2001) for increased trade with Africa, or those that supported HR 1298 for action against HIV-AIDS (2003). They are mobilized through networks of scholars-activists,³ through smaller independent associations and non-governmental organizations, through foreign affairs networks that debate the relevant issues with policy makers, and through lobby groups that apply pressure on Congress and

international organizations for funding. But there are very few significant African non-governmental institutions through which such foreign affairs dialogues can occur. The well known United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has provided a top-level venue for global discussions of African problems and issues. Then, at the intergovernmental level, the Global Coalition for Africa (GCA) tries to “bring together top African policymakers and their partners in the international community to build consensus on Africa’s priority development issues.”⁴ These are critical and essential functions, but these official venues do not allow the broad based citizen input that is essential to shaping policy in democratic societies. The question is how such broad based foreign affairs networks can be encouraged.

Here, an interesting dilemma presents itself. From independence through the 1990s, both the structures and dynamics of Sub-Saharan African states did not encourage the formation of foreign affairs institutions and foreign policy networks that existed apart from the state. Throughout the 1980s, African societies were grappling with the weak structures of states inherited from the colonial regimes, and inadequate institutional structures to allow popular representation. The emergence of autocratic leaders, and the succession of military governments, could and did occur because of the absence of alternative institutions to offset the strong military structures inherited from the

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colonial regimes. Not until the 1990s, when African popular demands for competitive elections were supported by western development partners and international financial institutions, could Africa begin to build the kind of civil society institutions and structures that could reinforce democracy, and provide channels for the emergence of popular opinion.

Some active, but government controlled foreign affairs institutes existed in countries with strong autocratic leadership, whether elected or military (Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, South Africa, etc.). These, while serving as the mouthpiece of government interests, also provided a small channel for educated researchers to do a delicate dance as they commented on cold war and regional dynamics. But these institutes did not challenge authoritarian national leadership, nor encourage more expansive foreign policy dialogues. It is no coincidence that independent foreign affairs institutions appeared first in the 1990s in countries that succeeded in moving from military governance and apartheid to elections (Namibia, Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, etc.). For the first time, these few institutions were free to air the voices of critical scholars and policy experts, and they often presented a regional or continental focus as they discussed policy issues. In a number of countries, democratic elections opened up space for the creation of new organizations for dialogue on national problems that required policy solutions, on new approaches to dealing with regional

relations, or on relations with western powers and 'development partners.' For example, in Ghana the dominance of Flight Lt. Rawlings within the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) prevented the emergence of civic organizations focused on policy issues, except those that were the natural outgrowth of the church or of government employment. Organizations such as teachers' associations, labor organizations, legal and media organizations were harassed into compliance or out of existence. Independent civic societies were suppressed, much as competing political parties were outlawed. However, after elections, new organizations arose to challenge the former dominance of the December 31st Women's Movement (headed by Nana Rawlings, wife of the President).⁵ Electoral dynamics, civil-military relations, and relations with international aid organizations and development partners — that were formerly channeled through government or December 31st, now were subjected to closer and more liberal scrutiny by organizations like the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD).⁶ In Nigeria, the American response to the aborted 1993 election and the subsequent rule of General Sani Abacha was the discontinuance of aid to government or quasi-government institutions, and the channeling of funds into the liberal and pro-democracy organizations, most notably National Democratic Coalition (NADECO).⁷ Other such organizations like Women In Nigeria (WIN) and the International

Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) made major contributions to education for democracy by informing the public about constitutional and rights issues; and still other ones like International Conflict Research (INCORE) began to discuss peace and conflict resolution strategies. Likewise, in South Africa, the 1994 elections after the ending of apartheid opened up space for a plethora of new institutions like Institute for Securities Studies (ISS), African Center for Constructive Resolution for Disputes (ACCORD), and the Foundation for Global Dialogue. In other select places (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Botswana, etc); the new organizations began to stimulate democratic conversations within and outside the country, engage in foreign affairs training, or to debate the new directions that were needed for regional and global relations.

Obviously, older research and educational institutions producing knowledge on foreign affairs did exist. In some places, a few institutions established soon after independence have survived and continued foreign policy research, although they were not able to encourage public dialogue during the earlier, repressive periods. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, which was taken over by government in 1971, continued to analyze Nigeria's regional and global relationships, but usually with an angle that favored the military government. South African institutions that functioned during the apartheid period — could not address issues from perspectives significantly

outside the government philosophy until after 1990. The Human Sciences Research Council, founded by the South African government in 1968, is the largest social science research institution in Africa. However, its narrow interpretation of its subjects and constituency was reworked in the early 1990s to focus on problems and issues of importance to the new South Africa, and to the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The African Institute of South Africa also continues "to remove the legacy of its apartheid past," by participating in the training of social scientists and knowledge in all disciplines, and by "collecting and disseminating information on African affairs."⁸ However, another set of liberal institutions that have always had considerable foreign policy potential are the scholarly ones, some of which have extensive track records. The Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research In Africa (CODESRIA) has a thirty year track record of training scholars, and engaging scholars from all parts of the continent in discussions, research, and publication on issues of importance to African national and policy development.⁹ Its written products often form the basis of information used for global policy dialogues. Likewise, the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) has continued to structure study groups encourage dialogue on new issues like "Africa's options in globalization," and African conflicts.¹⁰ While this institution was held suspect by many African govern-

ments with authoritarian leadership in the 1970s and 1980s, it came into its own as a venue for dialogue on political subjects in the 1990s.

For their part, the new institutions and organizations are actively engaged on issues affecting the nation and the region, and many of them do so with financial support from international foundations, western governments and development partners, members who pay dues, and the sale of publications they produce. Those conflict resolution or peace and democracy institutions that are based at Universities are providing links between scholars and the larger national and regional political communities. Another significant source of support for the new organizations is the African international community, transplants from the home country who are living in the U.S., the U.K., France, Canada, and Germany. Organizations of Africans abroad, based in the Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles areas, provide enormous capital and knowledge used by these incipient foreign affairs organizations.

In spite of their potential, most of these existing organizations have not yet taken the next logical step to become centers for foreign policy dialogue— networks such as those existing through the Council on Foreign Relations (NY and Washington DC), and the Councils on international affairs that exist in major cities across the United States. These organizations bring knowledgeable and interested individuals together across a broad

spectrum of opinion, so that they can engage policy makers in dialogue, educate them about the issues, and

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help shape the emerging policies over time. For the most part, they are not party-specific, and they encourage individuals currently holding policy positions to come when invited but not to take leadership roles within the organization. Some critics would

argue that only in advanced democracies does one see autonomous foreign policy organizations of citizen members, who engage government representatives and policy makers on the specifics of legislation and its policy impacts, and who seek to establish dialogue with foreign government representatives about foreign policy. Clearly, in democratic societies, citizens should be encouraged to be engaged on domestic issues. In all societies, national culture affects the ways that citizens look at domestic and international issues, and the more heterogeneous the society religiously and ethnically, the more intense are these debates about foreign policy. Even in the United States, historically there has been some debate between political parties about the importance of citizen input on foreign affairs subjects, but these debates are being resolved in favor of freedom of speech and popular participation.

Why should Africa be held to a different and lesser standard? Certainly many African scholars and activists are anxious for dialogue on foreign policy issues between themselves and with policymakers in the West. Many such dialogues on South Africa policy took place in the United States prior to Mandela's release from prison in 1990, and before the lifting of much apartheid legislation. In January 1998, when the Abacha regime was recalcitrant and determined to perpetuate itself in power, the Council on Foreign Relations held a conference on Nigeria at its headquarters in New York City, to which Nigerian activists,

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journalists, scholars, and civil society representatives came to talk about U.S. Nigeria relations and the way forward. It also backed a fact finding mission to Nigeria that produced recommendations on how to support the movement toward democracy.¹¹ That enthusiasm did not disappear, but was exhibited again in January 2000, as Africans from many organizations based in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington DC joined the deliberations of the National Summit on Africa in Washington, DC, and made policy recommendations supportive of African civil society participation in the construction of foreign policy.¹²

It is perhaps not surprising that in fledgling African democracies, the

government does not yet provide enthusiastic support for these new institutions concerned with international affairs. Some of the older institutions are still peopled by individuals whose thinking was shaped by prior authoritarian patterns of governance, and they may be struggling to achieve a new autonomy. Some of the new institutions, while committed to democracy, are still relatively weak, and most have not yet created relationships for regional or continental dialogue. But there is such capacity and possibility in the new period, until it would be a travesty if ways were not found to encourage the formation of foreign affairs networks. Just as it was possible for some African institutions to prevail upon

the OAU to create mechanisms for conflict resolution dialogue and action in the early 1990s, so it may be possible for them to establish a dialogue with the African Union and NEPAD in order to offer support for initiatives, and to gain support for the building of African foreign affairs dialogues. In the meantime, major questions arise about how the U.S. can support such developments.

Although the United States has had an interest in education for democracy for the past decade, we have not yet seen concerted efforts to build foreign affairs linkages in Africa that would enhance these post-cold war possibilities. During the Clinton Administration, the creation of the Education for Democracy and Development Initiative (EDDI) in 1998 allowed the U.S. government to work in 35 African countries to demonstrate its “commitment to help strengthen African educational systems and democratic principles, as well as to fortify and extend vital development partnerships between America and Africa.”¹³ EDDI has achieved much by focusing on building regional centers of educational excellence, encouraging citizen participation in public affairs, closing the education gap for women and girls, and the use of information technologies to bridge the digital divide. However, it would seem that a logical next step might be to further education for democracy by supporting projects that encourage the creation and strengthening of foreign policy education and dialogue networks.

Table 1: Sub-Saharan Africa Foreign Affairs Institutes 2003

| Organization | Status | Focus | Funding |
|---|--|---|---|
| African Institute for Economic and Social Development (INADES) Abidijan, Cote d'Ivoire | Founded 1962 | Domestic and social development issues, Sub-Saharan Africa | Cote d'Ivoire budget |
| Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), Cairo, Egypt | Independent, 1968 | Zionism, foreign relations, security and economic policy, domestic development issues | Foundation, Government, Membership |
| Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES), Cairo, Egypt | Independent, 1992 | Development and dissemination of economic policy reforms | Research Contracts |
| Ethiopian International Institute for Peace and Development (EIIPD) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia | Semi-Gov., 1996 | Foreign service training, public institutions, peace and conflict policy | International, NGOs, Government Foundations, Publications |
| Center for Policy Analysis (CEPA) Accra, Ghana | Independent, 1994 | Macroeconomic policy issues, Independent macroeconomic ideas | Foundations Contract research |
| Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), Accra, Ghana and Lagos, Nigeria | Independent, 1994 | Democracy, elections, economic development, military, regional | International, NGOs African capacity building, Foundation, USAID, Contracts |
| Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR), Nairobi, Kenya | Independent, 1994 | Develop policy ideas, share with Kenya and development partners | * |
| Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU), Windhoek, Namibia | 1990 | Training, economic development research for national policy | Foundations, Research Contracts, Interest Groups |
| African Institute of South Africa (AISA) Pretoria, South Africa | Independent, 1960 | African knowledge for peace, democracy, policy analysis, foreign relations | Government, NGOs, international, donations |
| Foundation for Global Dialogue (FGD) Braamfontein | Independent, 1995 | Foreign relations, diplomacy, regional cooperation | Foreign Foundations, Private Sector |
| Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Pretoria, South Africa | Independent, 1990 | Human/individual security, policy formulation in Sub-Saharan Africa | Development Agencies, International NGOs, Corps, Foundations |
| Institute for Strategic Studies (ISSUP) Pretoria, South Africa | University affiliated institute, 1974 | Strategic studies in southern Africa, defense, military | Membership Fees, Publications, Conferences, Contract research |
| Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) Kampala, Uganda | Independent, 1994 | Sustainable growth and development, policy analysis, international links | Donors, Foundations, Contract research, Government |
| Nigerian Institute for International Affairs Lagos, Nigeria | Independent, 1961 | National, regional, international issues, | Government, Publications |
| ACCORD, Capetown, South Africa | www.accord.org.za | Conflict resolution, peacekeeping | * |
| Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria | (INCORE) cds/metadata/ibadan.html | M.A. programs and courses | * |
| Center for Study of Violence and Reconciliation Capetown, South Africa | South African, NGO www.wits.ac.za/csvr | Peace, truth and reconciliation | * |
| Independent Projects Trust Umgeri, South Africa | www.webpro.co.za/clients/ipt | Facilitation, training for political and economic transformation | * |
| Inter-Africa Group, Ethiopia | www.interafrica.org | Peace, justice, humanitarian law, Horn of Africa | * |
| Quaker Peace Center Capetown, South Africa | www.quaker.org/capetown | Peace in southern Africa, education, training | * |

* information not available

What are African publics saying about much debated policies like the Millennium Challenge Account (2002)¹⁴ and NEPAD?

Indeed, there is a real need to hear the voices of ordinary African citizens as we debate African foreign policy issues. In much the same way as the popular voice on African debt and trade helped to reshape the thinking of international financial institutions and western governments, there is a need for organized African voices on the broad range of foreign affairs issues that affect American and African futures. Formal linkages between the American and the African foreign affairs institutions might be the spark needed to get the foreign policy exchanges going.

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- ² G. Mikell, "Forging Mutuality: ASA and Africa in the Coming Decades," *African Studies Review*, vol.34, no.2, issue, pp. 1-24.
- ³ Edmond J. Keller & Donald Rothchild (ed) *Africa in the New International Order: Rethinking State Sovereignty and Regional Security*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1996.
- ⁴ Global Coalition on Africa, [www.gca-cma.org/eabout.html], 2003.
- ⁵ December 31st claims a May 15, 1982 launch. However, it assumed national prominence in 1986 as Rawlings' PNDC government sought to consolidate its hold over civil society and women's organizations. See [www.dec31.org.gh/about1.html]. See also, G. Mikell, *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania, 1997, pp. 340-341.
- ⁶ Center for Democracy and Development aims to promote the values of democracy, peace & human rights in Africa and especially in the West African sub-region. See [www.cdd.org.uk/].
- ⁷ "NADECO Considers Four Options On its Future," *Vanguard* (Lagos) 25 June 2000.
- ⁸ The Africa Institute of South Africa Act, Number 68, 2001. *Government Gazette*, 21 February 2002.
- ⁹ See the CODESRIA website at [www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/codesria/codes_Menu.html].
- ¹⁰ See the AAPS website at [www.aaps.co.zw/news/html].
- ¹¹ Report on the Conference on Nigeria, by Salih Book, Darren Kew, Barnett R. Rubin, Council on Foreign Relations, January 1998. *Stabilizing Nigeria: Sanctions, Incentives, and Support for Civil Society*, by Peter M. Lewis, Pearl T. Robinson, and Barnett R. Rubin, Council on Foreign Relations Book published by the Twentieth Century Fund, January 1998.
- ¹² National Policy Plan of Action, National Summit on Africa, Washington DC, April 2000. "Africa, U.S. ties highlighted at National Summit on Africa," *Academy for Educational Development*, Spring 2000 *Academy News*.
- ¹³ "International Conference on Education, Development and Democracy: Africa Shaping Its Future," May 28-June 1, 2001 in Cotonou, Benin (sponsored by EDDI).
- ¹⁴ "The Millennium Challenge Account" Alan Larson, Undersecretary for Economic, Business, and Agriculture Affairs, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington DC, March 3, 2003.