

# Factors that Pave the Path for Africa's Underdevelopment

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**Abstract:** *Africa's underdevelopment or slow progress towards development has been a subject that wakes a lot of concerns and questions in the minds of Africans and non-Africans alike. While many authors have argued with clear evidence that the continent of Africa is the richest continent in the world, it remains unfortunately the poorest continent. The question remains, "How is it even possible for a continent rich in both human and material resources to be underdeveloped?" Anyway, part of the answer to such questions is traceable to both internal and external factors. The continent suffered a long reign of foreign rule and domination, leading to a great loss of the continent's most lucrative resources and values. Additionally, since independence, Africa continues to live in acute poverty and underdevelopment due to internal and external impediments hindering the continent's progress towards development.*

## Introduction

The continent of Africa had been argued by various scholars for having been in good shape, with good institutions of governance (kingdoms, queendoms, and empires), social hierarchies (the caste systems), and economic affairs (barter trading, and indigenous industries). As argued by Nunn, (2007), before Africa's contact with other parts of the world, there existed a high production equilibrium in many societies. Essentially, the existence of formidable structures responsible for the day-to-day affairs of the people and management and generation of resources in the continent was exemplary. Despite the diversity in societies and people, Africa enjoyed peace and smooth coexistence among the various communities, leading to a desired African development course. Although it is quite difficult to give an exact account of the level of production found in African societies, due to the absence of written literature as found in many other societies, some famous writers like Ibn Battuta, who made a voyage to the Mali empire in 1352, gave an account on the wealth, organization, and structures of the empire of Mali and Western Sudan.

Nunn, (2007) further argued that prior to the coming or intervention of foreign bodies in Africa, the continent had a well-composed urban population density; stressing that many parts of sub-Saharan Africa had reached a certain level of prosperity as compared to other parts of the world, in terms of population and other forms of organization. Due to this high population density living in urban areas or trade zones, the continent and its people enjoyed long-standing trade dealings and trade engagements within the continent and its people. Even in the absence of what has currently dominated trading, currency, Africans had well-established trade engagements in the form of barter, the use of cowries, and other means to facilitate trade.

## Definition of development

Development can be defined in many ways, depending on the specific issues that are considered by the one defining it. Development can also be considered a very subjective subject, as it can be looked at from various perspectives and interpreted differently. However, regardless of the disparities on what development means, there are common peculiar issues always considered in many contexts. Thus, in this paper, we will be looking at development as the "qualitative and quantitative improvement in people's living standards and in all aspects of human endeavor including education, access to information, infrastructure, housing, and employment opportunities in the modern sector" (Ojo, 2016). On the other hand, we will consider underdevelopment as any form of falling short of the above definition.

Based on the above definition, one may confidently arrive at a genuine conclusion that over the years Africa's development trajectory has been seriously affected and hindered by so many factors. These factors can be broadly classified under two main domains, namely, internal and external factors. Below is a discussion of how the two factors have affected development in Africa.

## External factors that contributed to Africa's underdevelopment

### The trans-Saharan slave trade

The trans-Saharan slave trade took the shape of buying and transferring slaves from sub-Saharan Africa to the North of Africa, and to the Arab world across the Sahara Desert. Although the perpetrators of injustices always have something or somewhere to attach themselves or associate their line of thinking, in this case, I will emphasize that there is a difference between 'Arabs' and 'Islam'. While Islamic teachings and principles condemn slavery and the slave trade and consider all human beings equal and entitled to their full rights, there were some Arabs who made a big fortune by buying, selling, and enslaving people. The trans-Saharan trade started in the form of salt and gold trade between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, which later grew to involve the buying of

slaves from sub-Saharan Africa to the Arab world (Kehinde, 2015). It has also been argued that the buying and selling of enslaved people was a constant characteristic in African trade, as the growth of kingdoms and empires relied heavily on the slave market (Open Stax, 2023). During this trade, African youths were exchanged for commodities such as dates, gum Arabic, books, etc., leading to the depopulation of sub-Saharan Africa, which consequently impacted production and productivity in the region and slowed development. Therefore, the trans-Saharan slave trade is one of the landmark external events which left a lasting impact on the African continent leading to its underdevelopment.

### **Trans-Atlantic slave trade**

The trans-Atlantic slave trade is one of the biggest crimes against humanity. This refers to the buying and transferring of slaves from different parts of Africa to America or the new world for the purpose of providing cheap labor for the plantations in the Americas. For a very long time, when the slave trade existed, millions of Africans were forcefully taken from Africa to work on the plantations. Many historical accounts explain that the trans-Atlantic slave trade started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and stretched to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is believed that the Europeans' mission to Africa was mainly for exploration, but before long they portrayed their hidden interest in dealing in the slave trade as a means of boosting their production on the plantations in the Americas. Nunn, (2007) argued that during the time of the slave trade, approximately 12 million slaves were taken from Africa to work on the plantations. It is also important to note that those taken as slaves to the Americas were the able men and women of Africa. There were people who could have stayed home and become so industrious to the continent and its people. In the area of agriculture, which is one of the backbones of every development, the old people and children who were left behind during the slave trade could not have done a lot in terms of production. This as a result delayed the progress of agriculture in Africa and its power towards self-realization and food self-sufficiency for the continent. Additionally, the absence of a youthful population in Africa during the slave trade also hampered the progress in trade, infrastructure, and economic growth. Most social works and social networking before the Europeans' contact with Africa were done by the youthful population. They built markets, roads, and bridges that fostered connections among the people and places on the continent. Therefore, it is undoubtedly obvious that the taking of most African youths into slavery left the continent short of manpower for development, hence contributing to the continent's underdevelopment.

### **The Partition of Africa**

Another event that seriously led to the underdevelopment of Africa is the nature and manner in which the Europeans partitioned the continent without considering the values and maintenance of the orderliness of the African societies. According to Nunn, (2007), when the trans-Atlantic slave trade came to a decline, Europeans generated a new interest in Africa. The Europeans at the time of the decline of the slave trade did not want to leave Africa, for they knew full well what was found beneath the belly of the African soil. The Europeans then rushed in their numbers to occupy territories in Africa. It was naturally obvious that their urge for territories would have erupted conflicts among themselves, as the scramble began with great intensity. Therefore, the Berlin conference of 1884-1885 was necessitated, as a room for the European powers to meet and discuss modalities on how to devour the African continent like a cake well placed on a plate. The uncaredful partitioning of the continent led to the splitting of well-formed societies and institutions in Africa. Who would dare say the Europeans were unaware of their actions? The Europeans knew what they were doing because they had a plan of dividing the people to reduce their strengths and togetherness, and possibilities to resist the Europeans' subjugation. Take the trans-Saharan trade for example, where many Africans from the West, North, and other parts of Africa had enjoyed a long-standing trade relationship in the form of barter and other means, but suddenly came to a stop due to the implanted boundaries between the newly formed countries as well as the shifting of the attention of African traders towards the coastline where they traded with the Europeans.

As the slave trade declined, European colonization of the African continent began, with the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 marking the beginning of official colonial rule. Although the period of colonial rule was very different from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, but the two events virtually contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa in various forms (Nunn, 2007).

### **Colonialism**

Colonialism is defined as the imposing of political, economic, social, and ideological domination over a weaker nation or society by a stronger nation. It is the absolute control of a nation's resources, affairs, and jurisdiction by a foreign power in a quest to suppress the weaker nation and harness and control its production and productivity, political affairs, and way of life. Therefore, the establishment of colonial rule in Africa put the affairs of the continent in the hands of the colonizers, who had little or no gesture for the welfare and development of the African continent and its people. Colonialism was an opportunity for the Europeans, through which a lot of Africa's resources and wealth were siphoned to Europe. Part of the many ways through which colonialism impeded the development of Africa, the colonial economy through its taxation without representation can be considered the severest.

### **Colonial economy – colonial taxation**

Nunn, (2007) argued that during colonialism, the colonial economy was largely dependent on the production, labor, and taxes collected from the native people of Africa. The colonizers imposed different taxes on the people such as hut, and head taxes as a means to raise revenue for their upkeep in the different countries. To some extent, the colonizers also exported a large quantity of

the revenues and resources they obtained from Africa to their various home countries to boost their development back home. Despite the great interest of the Europeans to administer the colonies in their own ways and fashion, they were never willing or ready to do this at their own cost. They relied on the revenue generated from the colonies to create comfort for their stay in Africa, and the development of their home countries. Through that unjust way of collecting and distributing resources in the colonies, colonialism left a very big scar of underdevelopment and dilapidation on the African continent. A significant amount of the resources that were to be used for the development of African society were siphoned to develop the home countries of the colonizers. The little infrastructural development done by the colonizers in Africa was to enhance a comfortable stay for them and to ease their outreach to the hinterland.

Additionally, the use of Africans as means of obtaining cheap labor during colonialism left so many homes and households in great poverty and destitution. The strong men and women of many families were put on an endless routine of labor for the colonizers with insignificant or no payment for their services. For example, in the Belgian Congo strong men and women were compelled to spend 40 hours gathering rubber for the colony every month, the service of which was either underpaid or not paid at all (Nunn, 2007). Thus, most of the quality time that natives were supposed to use to develop their homes, communities, and villages was spent working for the colonizers. Obviously, without much explanation, the consequence of such menace in retarding and slowing Africa's development is unquestionable.

In terms of the political organization of Africa, colonialism distorted everything in an attempt to replace the traditional system of ruling with the iron fist colonial rule. Manning, P. (1990) pointed out that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the African continent was highly militarized, resulting in the fall of great kingdoms and powerful warlords. The divide-and-rule system damaged the African political institutions. This created a lot of problems for the continent, and even after independence, such problems continue lingering due to border and territorial disputes. Political emancipation in Africa became very uncertain because of the reluctance of Europeans to stop meddling in Africa's political issues, as a means of prolonging foreign influence over the continent (Neocosmos, 2014).

### **Neo-colonialism**

According to Rahaman, (n.d) the term 'Neocolonialism' was coined by Kwame Nkrumah, who described it as the final stage, and the worst, of imperialism. According to Nkrumah, "For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility, and for those who suffer it, it is exploitation without redress."

Basically, at the time of independence for most African countries in the 1960s, the colonizers did not want to live entirely, they wanted to have a continued influence on the affairs of the continent. This continued to have a great impact on any attempt made by great Africans in restructuring the political, economic, and social spheres of the continent. The colonial legacy coupled with the selfness of some African leaders rendered so many efforts of the continent slow due to the lack of full political emancipation (Neocosmos, 2014). On a similar domain, Arowosegbe (2008) argued that the colonizers did not want to allow the independence of Africa's social sciences, as a measure of retaining some influence over the people and the continent.

After so many years of independence in sub-Saharan Africa, many countries still wallow in severe poverty and low economic growth. Out of the 40 countries found in sub-Saharan Africa, data has shown that 18 (45%) of the countries were poorer in the year 2000 than they were at the time of their independence (Nunn, 2007). The presence of foreign powers, mainly former colonial masters, has been one of the issues affecting such countries. In 2017 French President Emanuel Macron declared that France will no longer dictate the affairs of African countries but will rather focus on building close ties between Africa and Europe (Reuters, 2017). However, this sound too simple to be true. Until recently, the French influence on the economy and political affairs of many of its former colonies, except for Mali, remains very strong and unchanging.

### **Internal factors contributing to the underdevelopment of Africa.**

#### **Corruption and bad leadership**

Corruption and bad leadership are two different but interrelated terms in Africa's underdevelopment. Corruption refers to the act of government officials or ruling networks capturing the revenue streams of a country through which the resources of the state are put to the personal use of such individuals (Ojo, 2016). This is a serious constituent of Africa's underdevelopment. When leaders break the trust and confidence that the people have in them, by mismanaging the resources or personalizing public funds, it amounts to bad leadership. If you look at Africa today, politics and political leadership are one of the fastest ways to get rich. This is sure because African leaders, by virtue of their corruption and corrupt systems of governance, embezzle and personalize the state's resources and the expense of the public.

Furthermore, in the attempt of African governments or leaders to personalize their state resources, they have collaborated with outside institutions or individuals. African governments have successfully siphoned a lot of wealth from their countries to outside financial institutions that support them and keep their stolen wealth on agreed terms (Ojo, 2016). Imagine how useful such wealth would have been to the socio-economic development of the African countries from which the wealth is stolen. Corruption and bad leadership are serious issues affecting Africa's development.

Ojo, (2016) further outlined that more than \$200 billion was siphoned by African leaders in 1991, which was more than Africa's foreign debts at the time. These are the very African countries that will be complaining to their citizens that their foreign debts are high. This is just one example out of many. Such an amount could have been better used to develop so many projects that will support the youths and women and make life better.

Consequently, I join the argument of many other scholars that corruption and bad leadership are part of the most damaging menace to Africa's economy. Governments continue to loot resources from their states for their self-aggrandizement and selfish gains at the detriment of the citizens who continue to live in poverty and destitution. After embezzling a lot from their states, African governments serve as representatives of the people and take heavy loans, that will have long-lasting effects on the citizens. This has really impacted the slow development of Africa.

### **Military Coup d'états in Africa**

A Coup d'état is simply defined as a military takeover of a government. It can also be referred to as a situation when the rule of a government is suddenly brought to an end by the military or soldiers. According to Toyin, (2015), "coup d'état is a political act, it is armed politics." After independence, Africa witnessed lots of coups in various countries. It was a bitter experience in countries where many people had to die during the process. Military takeovers constitute a great disadvantage to societal order and peace. Of course, this is not meant to qualify the extreme overstay in power as portrayed by many African leaders, it is rather an attempt to discuss how the two factors above have waked serious confrontations and brutalities against Africans. Military coups in Africa have led to severe threats on the population and the fleeing of many to overseas countries where they remained. The bitter competitions among politicians and the intra-class rivalry are also major issues not to forget about as impediments of military takeovers. Therefore, when talking about the factors that slow down Africa's development, the sudden and often meaningless change of governments stands out among many others. In the case of Nigeria, where there have been 6 successful military takeovers between 1966 to 1993 (Toyin, 2015), one would wonder whether some of the regimes were in fact given enough time to manifest good governance to the people. After every successful coup in Africa, the next thing is for the military to subject the population to fear and surrender to the military forces. In 1994, when the military junta of The Gambia successfully overthrew the government of Sir Dawda Jawara, the coup leader Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh and his team suspended the constitution and ruled by decree or force for two years before taking the country back to civilian rule (Wiseman, 1996).

Military takeovers in Africa are mainly ways of putting the efforts of governments to a standstill. In essence, is one of the main reasons why Africa's development pattern has been in the form of one step forward and two steps backward. Military rules severely obstruct the respect for human rights (e.g., freedom of movement, and speech), and slow down production and productivity in the continent. Toyin (2015) further stressed that the unexpected uprooting of a government and forceful implant of military rule instills fear and affects the social climate in a country, affecting social interactions among people and altering production and productive activities.

Despite the reasons mostly stated by soldiers for embarking on coups and forcefully ousting governments, Nyangíoro, (1993), Toyin, (2015), and Ruth First Papers (2012) argued against the consequences of military coups, stating that military takeovers are part of the severest of factors delaying the development of Africa.

### **Overstay in power by African leaders.**

One of the biggest internal problems to Africa's development is the overstay in power by African leaders. Most African leaders cling to power and want to remain there forever. Such leaders refuse to leave office even if they know that they are not meeting the socioeconomic growth of their people (Ojo, 2016). The failure of African leaders to respect the views of the people in instituting term limits and ruling responsibly has been a much-talked-about issue in African countries. Looking at the pattern of leadership in some African countries and how the conditions of such countries worsen since independence, one may arrive at a conclusion that the self-perpetration and self-aggrandizement of African leaders is a major consequence of the continent's underdevelopment. For example, Ojo (2016) highlighted that Mobutu Sesé Seko ruled Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) for three decades (1965- 1997); Daniel Arap Moi, ruled Kenya for 24 years (1978-2002); Omar Bongo ruled Gabon for 41 years (1967-2009). Mathieu Kérékou ruled Benin for 19 years, (1972-1991). Félix Houphouët-Boigny ruled Cote d'Ivoire for 33 years (1960-1993); Denis Sassou-Nguesso ruled the Republic of Congo for about 40 years on two different terms; Robert Mugabe ruled Zimbabwe for about 35 years; Blaise Campaoré ruled Burkina Faso for 27 years; Muammar al-Qaddafi ruled Libya for 42 years (1969-2011). Additionally, Sir Dawda Jawara ruled The Gambia from 1965 to 1994; and his successor Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh ruled for 22 years (1994-2016). These and many more examples of overstay in power by African leaders lead to serious corruption, embezzlement of funds, and personalization of public properties, which greatly impact the socio-economic growth and development of the continent. For example, according to Wiseman, (1996), the 29 long rule of Sir Dawda Jawara in The Gambia was brought to an end by the military, who accused him of corruption and embezzlement of funds. During Jawara's rule, the country also experienced insignificant infrastructural development and other areas, especially education. The delay in getting the first university (34 years after independence) constituted a drastic slowness to the enlightenment process of the citizens. According to the University of The Gambia, (2023), the establishment of the university came at a time when it was much needed, in a quest to respond to the long years

of waiting. On the other hand, the long reign of Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh witnesses the gross violation of human rights and the personalization of public funds and resources. This was manifested during the early and late years of Jammeh's rule when the fracas among the coup plotters started, leading to the jailing and brutalization of Sanna Sabaly, Sadibou Hydara, and many other subsequent violations, instilling of fear, etc. (Wiseman, 1996). Furthermore, Mobutu Sese Seko's regime was no better. It was highly characterized by corruption and the stealing of a lot of public funds. Mobutu owned a lot of properties in different countries around the world; he sold a lot of Zaire's copper, cobalt, and diamond, the proceeds of which went directly into his personal accounts (Richburg, 1991).

### **Conclusion**

The underdevelopment of Africa is still an issue that attracts diverse views from different scholars. While many relate Africa's underdevelopment to the tragedy of external factors such as the slave trades, colonialism, and neocolonialism; others blame the internal factors such as military rule, overstaying in power, and corruption and bad leadership. What is very certain is that the underdevelopment of the African continent owes its causes to both internal and external factors. For a very long time, the continent has suffered from the presence and domination of foreign forces and influence, making it difficult to obtain self-realization, self-dependence, and actualization of developmental institutions in the continent. At a point when Africans expected better systems and institutions (at independence) their expectations were never met, due to the new oppression in the hands of African leaders themselves. Corruption, embezzlement of funds, tribal affiliation in governance, overstay in political positions, and endless military interventions in politics have cost the continent an uncertain future in terms of development, poverty alleviation/reduction, and integration. Consequently, Africa's underdevelopment is no longer a blame game, is a holistic responsibility that calls for a holistic approach to redress, restructure, and revitalize the position of the continent in world affairs.

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