CHANGING THE LEADERSHIP GAME IN AFRICA: THE CASE FOR “PEOPLESHP”
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ABSTRACT
This paper challenges the notion that the main reason for Africa’s under-development is failure of political leadership. It argues that historically, good individual leaders emerged and put in conscientious efforts to develop and transform their countries but their good efforts were often betrayed by either an unsupportive people and/or the unavailability of resources to achieve their vision and mission. Leadership provides the pathway; but the people must provide leadership support to achieve progress and development - all of which have to be underlain by the availability of resources.

The paper draws insights from Psychology and Behavioral Economics researches and further argues that a key challenge to leadership are numerous behavioral problems among the people which inhibit leadership success and often undermine even genuine socio-political agendas; key among them is Societal cynicism which discounts even the best efforts of others (mostly social or political leaders) and has stunted Africa’s growth because of its mass prevalence. It argues that the only way Africa can succeed is that a critical mass of its people has to become leaders in their own right and they do not leave everything to political leadership but lead themselves and others in a shared vision provided and guided by political leadership.

The paper also posits that the first factor that has to change to overcome chronic societal cynicism and accelerate leadership change in Africa is that Africa’s view about leadership itself has to change from over reliance on political leadership – where citizens look up to what the government can/should do/provide for citizens. While leadership from political actors is critical, it certainly cannot be the panacea for solving all Africa’s problems. Therefore, this dependency on political leadership has to change and be substituted by a critical mass of people-leaders (“Peopleship”) in various walks of life who positively work individually and/or together to stimulate change and achieve a more collective progress and development agenda for African countries.

The concluding thesis of the paper is that for any African national transformation agenda to take effect in a sustainable manner, we need three factors to be present and interplay: 1. Leadership (mostly political);

1 The word “peopleship” is coinage creation of the author – to explain, in a short form, the notion of leadership that this article argues for and presents, that has not yet found its way in the English Dictionary.
2. A critical mass of Peopleship (responsible, responsive and active citizenship who are leaders in their own right in various walks of life); and 3. Resources (human resources, wealth, cooperation (local and international), good laws (including an encouraging environment)). The positive interplay between these three factors is critical for any country’s transformation. Therefore, it argues that good leaders without resources will fail; good leaders without the support of their people (peopleship) will fail; and good people with bad leaders will similarly fail. The concept of leadership therefore needs to be more broadly understood used to be inclusive of citizens and their role.

INTRODUCTION

Africa’s leadership problem is a complex one and the solutions for dealing with it has to be thought “out of the box”. To begin with, our society is acutely afflicted, by a behavioral problem known as “Chronic Societal cynicism” arising from a prolonged breach of social contract and the lack of good models; which has affected the minds of our people for generations. The evidence abounds that there is an acute affliction along the lines of Leung’s Social & Societal Cynicism - a cultural syndrome associated with a general mistrust of social systems and other people.\(^2\)

If more countries in Africa are to become the next Rwanda, Singapore, or Malaysia, our strategic objective has to be focused on how to break societal cynicism and recruit the people in marshalling their own futures under the guidance of sincere leadership. In the 21st century, the statistics of our progress is damning.\(^3\) We mostly live in fiction states due to decades of misrule and breach of social contract due to abuse of power, corruption, ignorance and sometimes, lack of ambition.

THE EVIDENCE

Our history is replete with facts and evidence that support the claim that Africa is at the point when not many believe in the existence of a social contract and citizens behave as though nothing good can come out of others, including themselves, and they discount even the best efforts of others (particularly political leadership). Our social and historical reality is that we have had societal fragmentation, polarization and alienation starting from pre-colonial era to date, that has culturized cynicism and lack of trust at almost all levels.

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\(^3\) African Countries largely occupy the bottom of the Human Development Index. See Index here: https://hdr.undp.org/content/announcement-202122-human-development-report-set-be-released-8-september-2022
Social cynicism is “...a negative assessment of human nature, a biased view against some groups of people, a mistrust of social institutions, and a belief that people disregard ethical means in achieving their ends.” Underlying such belief systems are claims that "Powerful people tend to exploit others; “Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses;” “It is rare to see a happy ending in real life”. So, people focus more on the pleasures of the present than sacrifice for the future. The citizenry also believes that the world produces malignant outcomes and is, on average, distrustful, unhappy, and dissatisfied with life. It is the belief that they are surrounded by a “nature red people in tooth and claw, suppressed by the powerful and others and subjected to depredation of willful and selfish individuals, groups and institutions.”

It is in this state that most of Africa is currently trapped. Therefore, there has to be a new approach to leadership (thinking) and education to change this phenomenon.

**WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?**

Conducting a research of this nature would lead one to a plethora of definitions of the term ‘Leadership’. Afegbua and Adejuwon (2012)\(^4\) acknowledges this when making reference to Hakman’s work ‘The Challenges of Defining Leadership: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly’. However, some of the prominent definitions make reference to a leader’s ‘traits and attributes’ as often used to describe ‘natural or born’ leaders. The others focus on the leader’s ‘influence or power’, and the roles they play in order to achieve a desired goal.

Writing for Forbes Magazine, Kruse (2013)\(^5\) gives what looks like a comprehensive definition of the term when he states that “Leadership is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.” He postulates the following reasons:

- “Leadership stems from social influence, not authority or power”. That you do not need authority or power for you to be a leader.
- “Leadership requires others, and implies they don’t need to be direct reports.
- No mention of personality traits, attributes, or even a title; there are many styles, many paths, to effective leadership.
- It includes a goal, not influence with no intended outcome.” He rejects John Maxwell’s definition of leadership as “..influence – nothing more, nothing less”

Whatever the definition one choses to rely on, it involves people who follow a person and his/her vision.

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GENERAL DIAGNOSIS OF AFRICA’S LEADERSHIP PROBLEM.

What then is responsible for such failures to make our own lives better almost 60 years after independence for most African states? It certainly is not that good efforts are not being applied in many countries or societies. While corruption has certainly played a major role, we continue to exhibit bounded rationality & Williamson’s Contractual Man6 problem in our social contract structure – bounded rationality (the basis or transactional theory) assumes that most transactions occur with limited information (though actors try to be rational). In this situation people try to use problem-solving and decision-making processes to negotiate transactions while monitoring and adapting the transaction over time. Our situation is worse because we have high levels of opportunism and assumption that people will do whatever it takes to maximize their interests – lie, cheat, steal, etc. Deception and misinformation are common tactics within our social structures. This is a troublesome source of behavioral uncertainty in economic cum social transactions.

We exhibit George Akerlof’s “Lemons”7 characteristics and the economics of dishonesty at almost all levels of our social relations. Most things are not what they seem. We want “oranges” but we get “lemons”. Deception and dishonesty underlie our actions, and that includes the teaching quality in our universities and the degrees and titles many carry. We are very unwilling to move forward because we think at all given times, “yesterday is better than today”. Generally, trust is lacking and the centre is not holding. We are in Dixit’s Multi-Person Prisoners’ Dilemma8 where even knowledge sharing is governed by the perceived payoff we hope to benefit.

In our social dealings, we are exhibiting and trapped in Hardin’s tragedy of the Commons9 – a “not-mine-nor-yours” mentality. The tragedy of the commons is a situation in a shared-resource system where individual users, acting independently according to their own self-interest, behave contrary to the common good of all users by depleting or spoiling the shared resource through their individual or collective action. As a result, everyone loses overall.

The result of all this is that, if the important actors in that relationship – political leaders and the people, do not change for the better, African nations will continue to fail because we would be dangerously

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trapped in a Nash equilibrium – which, in economics and game theory, is a stable state of a system involving the interaction of different participants, in which no participant can gain by a unilateral change of strategy; if the strategies of the others remain unchanged. To put things into perspective, even with all good intentions, the great plans and aspirations of some leaders on the continent for their countries will fail to yield the desired result if other actors, particularly the people (including those in opposition parties and groups) do not adjust accordingly but instead systematically undermine the strategies and policies of leaders aimed at realizing the well-intentioned goals.

THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

Beyond the mass affliction with cynicism, which arose as a result of prolonged betrayal and breach of the social contract between political leaders and the people, one major problem associated with leadership in Africa is the way and manner many people, including scholars, view leadership – especially political leadership. Almost every scholastic work on the challenges of leadership in Africa seems to point fingers entirely on the inadequacies of political leadership. Political leadership in this case constitutes the president, mayors, governors, ministers, parliamentarians and other public officials in top executive, legislative and judicial bodies, etc. . Masango (2002)\textsuperscript{10}, for example, opines that “African people treat a leader by virtue of being a king, priest or ruler chosen by virtue of the office in order to serve the nation.” This explains that most of the holders of offices outside this realm do not see themselves – or are not often seen – as leaders who should demonstrate leadership traits for the betterment of society, or be held accountable for the offices they hold or their actions which impact society. As such, political leadership is often blamed for almost every wrong in the continent, in that they are required to meet each and every need of society or solve every societal problem.

Furthermore, whenever scholars tend to explain leadership failures in Africa, they will almost always make reference to political leadership – as Mbandlwa (2020)\textsuperscript{11} shows in his article ‘Challenges of African Leadership after the Independency’ where he states:

“The vicious cycle of conflict and corruption in Africa is in the bloodstream of African leaders and potential leaders. The mother of all challenges in Africa stem from African leaders...”.

He definitely meant political leaders.

Another major problem associated with leadership is the lack of education among many people in Africa. According to the Brookings Center for Universal Education, Africa is facing an education crisis which is

\textsuperscript{10} Maake Masango, ‘Leadership in the African context’ (2002) VERBUMET ECCLESIA JRG 23
\textsuperscript{11} Zamokuhle Mbandlwa, Challenges of African Leadership after the Independency (2020), 63 Solid State Technology.
affecting development across all spheres of the continent. This inevitably affects the continent’s workforce, which should ultimately provide leadership for the growth and development of the continent.

**HOW WE CAN ACCELERATE LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN AFRICA?**

The first factor that has to change to overcome chronic societal cynicism and accelerate leadership change in Africa is that *Africa’s view about leadership itself has to change.* I often take inspiration from the words of John F. Kennedy, who said in his Inaugural Address in 1961 that “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.” I see leadership as one that should be driven by people — which I often refer to as ‘peopleship’. I think there has been over reliance on political leadership — citizens look up to what the government can/should do/provide for citizens. In all African countries, citizens often look up to the president/prime minister and the government to provide the goodies of society or solve all societal problems. While leadership from political actors is important, it certainly cannot be the panacea for solving Africa’s problems. Therefore, this dependency on political leadership has to change.

Management scientists are now advancing the notion of ‘Distributed leadership’\(^\text{12}\), which, according to the Lead Academy, “recognizes that authority does not rest with one key individual.” As such, this makes room for everyone in society or the nation to take up the mantle of leadership in their respective roles, tasks or offices assigned to them. It creates people-based leadership.

Africans have been too reliant on political leadership to provide everything that can even be provided by the ordinary man. Examples of this are everywhere: We have seen many times where the government would build a state-of-the-art hospital; employ all kinds of medical and administrative staff for the proper functioning of the hospital. Yet, when the janitors, for example, fail in their duty to keep the hospital clean, members of the public would prefer to lambast government or the minister responsible for health for that particular failure. This is clearly problematic as the all-round care of that hospital would need leadership at different levels that are far removed from the Minister of Health.

Many things have gone wrong in our communities because those who are supposed to take up leadership in their assigned tasks have failed to deliver simply because they are not normally held to account. Political leadership is often the target – and an easy one. I do not mean to say political leadership bears no blame; it often does, but the blame can also be equally shared with many not in political positions who fail to be leaders at their level.

\(^{12}\)See [https://www.hyperisland.com/distributed-leadership](https://www.hyperisland.com/distributed-leadership)
To solve this anomaly, we should take heed to the words of Martin Luther King Jnr. who once said:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

For me, this defines leadership – doing your own part no matter what you are tasked to do, which collectively makes society better.

It cannot be gainsaid that political leadership needs to provide the vision and direct the people to attain the things the nation aspires for, but when it comes to rolling out that vision, everybody can be a leader in the environment, community, institution, department, section or unit they find themselves. The late American civil rights activist, Martin Luther King Jnr., once emphatically made this point when he said: “Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve.”

There are foundational factors that need to exist that would allow the leadership explained herein-above to work to ensure meaningful change for Africa. They include:

1. Education.

   I am a firm believer in Plato’s ‘Philosopher King Theory’. The Greek and Athenian philosopher, in his book ‘Republic’ spoke of the need for people with knowledge and the highest form of education and intellect to be made to govern. The educational challenges in Africa means people who are ill-educated and with lack of experience often find themselves in political leadership positions. This is also the case with the workforce of the continent’s civil/public service, which is the highest employer in many African countries. Sometimes requirement for an officer’s job is more stringent than that for the Presidency or Membership of Parliament. Emma Emeozor of Nigeria’s “The Sun” stated in the article ‘Challenges of Leadership in Africa’, that Africa must not continue to allow “people with poverty of ideas to occupy the corridors of power”. In Sierra Leone, for example, the only educational requirement prescribed for qualification for a member of Parliament, which is the country’s supreme law making body, is a mere proficiency “to speak and to read the English Language”. This also applies for the Presidency – the highest office in the land.

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13 In *The Republic*, Plato argues that kings should become philosophers or that philosophers should become kings, or philosopher kings, as they possess a special level of knowledge, which is required to rule the Republic successfully.
Required educational qualification and experience help people to know the problems and challenges associated with their offices or sectors and how to go about addressing them. Emma Emeozor makes the valid point that “Whatever be the argument, it is the ability of African leaders to understand the problems of the continent and work selflessly to solve them that determines how the pendulum would swing.”

political leadership – from the top to bottom- should be given more significance by ensuring that people with a wealth of education and experience are made to hold critical positions in governance, as well as public service.

2. **Inclusive Governance.**

This has often been discussed with regional, tribal, religious and special niche dimensions. In as much as these are important, the most important is the empowerment and inclusion of women in governance. It is inconceivable for women, who make up the larger population of the continent to be sidelined in governance. It is this way we can continue to see inroads in achieving developmental aspirations of the continent.

**DEALING WITH CHANGE – THE MCHIAVELI’S PROBLEM**

In a continent proliferated by distrust between the government and the governed opposition to policies and failure of leadership will always be prevalent because of what is known in Political Science as “Machiavelli’s Problem”\(^\text{14}\) –

> “...all those who profit from the old order will be opposed to the innovator, whereas all those who might benefit are at best tepid supporters of him. This lukewarmness arises partly for fear of their adversaries who have the laws on their side, or partly from the skeptical temper of men who do not really believe in new things unless they have been seen to work well”

This is why change-makers in Africa often get attached and in most cases, bad drives out good. It is easier for a cynical critical mass to gang up and strategize to succeed.

**FEHR & TYRAN’S STRATEGIC SUBSTITUTABILITY\(^\text{15}\) AS A SOLUTION**


\(^\text{15}\) Ernst Fehr, Jean-Robert Tyran, Limited Rationality and Strategic Interaction: The Impact of the Strategic Environment on Nominal Inertia”, *CONOMETRICA: MAR 2008, VOLUME 76, ISSUE 2, PAGES 353 -394*
Despite the potentials in our human and natural resources, the poverty rate in Africa remains alarming. The irony of Africa is best illustrated by the axiom “poverty amidst plenty”. Various studies have supported the position that if we seriously maximize our revenue mobilization; utilize our resources judiciously by negating corruption and corrupt practices of all kinds; it would be extreme for Africa to need foreign loans and donations to ensure quality of life for its people\textsuperscript{16}. We only need to rethink and strategize leadership.

To succeed, the countries on the continent do not need every one to shed their cynicism. Our best hope lies in the last sentence of Machiavelli’s Problem – “...unless they have been seen to work well”. To produce that result, a small share of rational individuals may generate an aggregate positive outcome in a manner disproportionate to their individual contribution. That is how Kagame and his people are changing Rwanda. That is how Liu Kwan Yiu and his people changed Singapore. That is how Jerry Rawlings and the Ghanaians changed Ghana. That is how Xin Jin Ping and is people are changing China. strategic substitutability, a minority of rational agents may suffice to generate aggregate outcomes consistent with the predictions of rational models.

This critical mass of individuals (people in various places, occupations, positions, walks of life, etc.), by their actions and results, wield and disproportionately influence access to social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital and power to stimulate and ensure change by their leadership and results. To succeed, we need to set standards and police ourselves well. We should “Trust, but Verify. Sanction or Reward”. We should give a positive outlook to things. It is this belief system – the belief that results are what will cure our cynicism, that underlies the revolution that is happening in Kigali. We can build our own Rwanda everywhere in Africa. We can transform the lives of the people; we can control corruption and subdue that monster. We can change our story. We only need to confront our cynicism and overcome it with results produced by the will of a critical mass of citizens who believe and pursue progress and development through being leaders in their own rights.

**CONCLUSION**

Over 60 years since most African countries gained independence, the cause of our development challenges and the path towards progressive national transformation has remained the subject of scholarly research and intellectual debate. An enduring perspective is that the singular most important

reason for Africa’s lag in development is attributed to ‘failure of leadership’. The great Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, is the most widely quoted on this topic from his book “The Trouble with Nigeria” 17. He wrote:

“The only trouble with Nigeria is the failure of leadership, because with good leaders Nigeria could resolve its inherent problems such as tribalism; lack of patriotism; social injustice and the cult of mediocrity; indiscipline; and corruption.”

This is perhaps true for the nature of leadership that Africa needed after independence - political leadership. However, in the 21st century, transformative leadership goes beyond political leadership. It is a people-based leadership that I will call “peopleship” - when people, at least a critical mass, are leaders in their own rights in various walks of life. When Achebe concluded “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership”, he may have failed to factor in the people – and that is at least 33% the problem.

My idea of this model is that for any African national transformation agenda to take effect in a sustainable manner, we need three factors to be present and work together: 1. Leadership (mostly political); 2. Peopleship (responsible, responsive and active citizenship who are leaders in their own right in various walks of life); and 3. Resources (human resources, wealth, cooperation (local and international), good laws (including an encouraging environment)). The interplay between these three factors is critical for any country’s transformation.

Historically, great individual leaders emerged and put in conscientious efforts to develop and transform their countries. Among them were Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, Nelson Mandela, Milton Margai, Jerry Rawlings, Muhamar Gadaffi, etc. They had many of the exemplary leadership skills including charisma, courage, vision and drive. However, their good efforts were often betrayed by either an unsupportive peopleship and/or the unavailability of resources to achieve their vision and mission. Leadership provides the pathway; but the people must provide leadership support to achieve progress and development - all of which have to be underlain by the availability of resources.

The countries in Africa that are close examples of transformative progress in the last 60 years like Botswana, Mauritius, Rwanda, Egypt, Ghana, South Africa, Seychelles, Morocco, etc. have had at least two of the three factors, even if not all, working together in order to shape their transformation agenda. Leadership must always be there as a primus factor; but it cannot stand alone. The people have to be both

17 Chinua Achebe, The Trouble with Nigeria, (Heinemann 2015)
responsible and responsive to a shared vision and values. A form of system to manage the resources of a country well (often informed by leadership) has to also exist.

Some countries that have continued to struggle, like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Congo (too many to name all) have had a combination of bad leadership, poor peopleship and little resources due to mismanagement or corruption that has stunted their ability to really stimulate any meaningful development agenda. Good leaders without resources will fail. Good leaders without the support of their people will fail. Good people with bad leaders will fail.

Admittedly, the actions that drive peopleship are based on demonstrated and credible leadership and resources, no doubt. However, sustainable transformational change cannot be achieved by the availability of those alone. Paul Kagame is transforming his country because most of his people bought into his vision and supported it responsibly. The same could be said of Ghana and Rawlings. The same of Ian Kharma and Botswana. We badly need good peopleship to support good leadership in Africa particularly, when, with all the challenges, the signs of good resource management and availability are beginning to be evident.

I understand that our people have been plagued and traumatized by decades of bad political and sometimes social leadership underlain by corruption, deception and insincerity. They have, for long, had many reasons to doubt their own countries' promise and direction. However, the only thing we cannot lose now is hope - that belief that we were not made to be the laughter of the planet - with too much under our soils; yet have too little to show above it. We have fertile soils almost everywhere; yet hungry stomachs walk the belly of our lands. We are neither accursed nor misplaced; we have just been lost both as leaders and people. To overcome these unpleasantness, the People have to shed their cynicism and support good leadership - particularly when there is promise and result in their efforts. If we cultivate and support good leadership, mobilize and manage our resources well, live and toil as responsible and responsive citizens in support of emerging leadership, we can, together, recreate, rethink and remake the Africa our fore-bearers dreamt of, our parents yearned for, and we today hope and work towards. Together, we can combine the factors for national transformation - leadership, peopleship and resources - and use them to unleash the true potentials of Africa – and soon place it among nations that are called “great”.

Too much reliance on political leadership has failed Africa and afflicted its people with mass cynicism. It is peopleship that will change it. Peopleship is leadership beyond the political; it exists and thrives when a critical mass of the people become leaders in their own right and move their respective countries forward
conscientiously from all walks of life led by a shared vision and sometimes values. It is a people-based leadership – when not everything revolves around political leaders and the agenda they set. The people become leaders in their own right and move their countries’ destinies forward.

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