The experience of local and regional development in Africa

Etienne Nel

Introduction

The recent history of local and regional development in Africa has been one marked with experiences ranging from disappointments and desperate attempts to cope with the effects of marginalization to ambitious supranational programmes and efforts to achieve unique forms of ‘African development’. From the outset it is important to point out the complexity and diversity which characterizes Africa, which was, as of November 2009, home to over one billion people living in 54 different countries (BBC, 2009). These countries range from some of the world’s poorest such as Chad and Malawi through to relatively affluent middle-income countries such as South Africa and Mauritius which are experiencing sustained economic growth and integration into the global economy (Ayeni, 1997). Significant language, religious and cultural differences and the existence of governments which range from at least one case of an absolute monarchy, to military states and true democracies complicate the picture and prevent the drawing of uniform conclusions.

Africa’s recent past has clearly been one of the most traumatic on the planet. Economic collapse, debt, corruption and disease have proven to be significant obstacles to development and major inducements to policy-makers to implement appropriate responses (Konadu-Agyemang and Panford, 2006). Colonialism divided Africa into a series of artificial dependencies which cut across pre-existing tribal borders and imposed a system of resource extraction within the broader context of an International Division of Labour (Griffith, 1995; Niang, 2006). The initial optimism of the post-Second World War independence era and the pursuit of both pan-Africanism and various ‘grand development’ schemes was sadly curtailed by the 1980s debt crisis, maladministration, corruption and the marginal role Africa now plays in the global economy, which has since been compounded by the negative effects of trade liberalization, low growth rates in commodity prices and currency devaluation (Griffith, 1995). The fact that Africa has the fastest growing population rates in the world has not aided matters in countries which are experiencing minimal levels of economic growth, while the devastating effects of AIDS is severely straining fragile economies and government resources. In the view of Griffith (1995: 191) ‘Africa is the most disadvantaged continent in terms of poverty, political unrest, quality of life and human suffering’. As a result the potential
value of well-formulated local and regional development it is apparent.

At a continental level, Africa in the twenty-first century faces both enormous challenges and opportunities. It has some of the richest mineral resources in the world and there is a very strong sense of regional identity which has led to the formation of several key regional political and economic unions. Within countries, the Washington Census (the World Bank and IMF's concepts of state economic management) has curtailed previous forms of state intervention while larger ‘regional’ initiatives within countries are very much on the back-burner. Themes of decentralization and community empowerment have become a hallmark of the survival endeavours of marginal towns and communities, often with direct reliance on the NGO sector for support. Its is apparent that significant policy and strategic changes are taking place in Africa; however, it seems that ‘the current regional trend in Africa has received little scholarly attention especially in a systematic and comprehensive way. This is due partly to the fact that the processes are currently unfolding and there is still uncertainty in the outcomes’ (Adejombi and Olukoshi, in Cambria Press, 2008).

This chapter overviews Africa’s experiences in regional and local development over the last 60 or so years. It starts with a brief review of the pre-Independence scenario before focusing on national development schemes and pan-Africanism as pursued in the 1950s through to the 1970s. Following what has been referred to as the ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s in Africa, as a result of the debt crisis and structural adjustment, focus shifts to look at recent pan-regional initiatives, national policies and various local coping strategies. Given the shear size and complexities of the continent and its 54 countries it is impossible to capture the micro-detail of what is happening in each country; rather emphasis is placed on generic themes and the examination of specific illustrative cases as appropriate.

The pre-independence and early independence eras in Africa, 1950–1980s

European colonialism imposed an artificial division of space on the pre-existing tribal kingdoms of Africa. Empires such as the Ashanti and Monomotapa, which were regional in extent, and which had developed regional trading routes within African and with the Middle East were subsumed in a European order which divided the continent into European ‘spheres of influence’ (Best and de Blij, 1977; Griffith, 1995). That ‘development’ did take place is undeniable; however, this often took the form of linking the colony to the mother country through defined systems of transport and resource abstraction, which made once economically independent areas dependent on external economies for inputs, jobs, products and even food, as economies were restructured, often becoming mono-economies to supply products such as cotton (from the Sudan) and copper (from Zambia) to Europe (Ayeni, 1997; Makinda and Okumu, 2008). Regional development in the sense of the creation of industrial-mineral and commercial-agricultural complexes was a hallmark of this period with the granting of lands to European settlers and companies and significant state and private investment in key industrial-mineral complexes. Examples include tea production in the Kenyan Highlands, cotton production in the Sudan, tobacco in what is now Zimbabwe and cocoa in West Africa. Key mineral-industrial nodes include the Witwatersrand in South Africa, once the wealthiest gold-producing area in the world, the Copperbelt complexes in what are now Zambia and the Congo and the industrial cities of present-day Zimbabwe (Best and de Blij, 1977). These complexes were all linked to large, purpose-designed ports with dedicated high-volume rail linkages (Davidson, 1994; Griffith, 1995). An examination of historical railway maps of Africa provides insight into the nature of this historical, extractive economy and its
selective influence on the continent. The dense rail network in industrialized South Africa stands in contrast to the effective absence of any rail connectivity in poorly developed Chad, while in countries such as Mozambique and Angola, short unconnected railway lines link ports to single resource supply zones in the interior (Davidson, 1994).

At the international scale, the concept of ‘spheres of influence’ in the British, French, Portuguese, Spanish and German parts of the continent led to the formation of close cross-border trade and administrative links which was most noticeable in French West Africa where two Federations were formed under French rule. Later in the British sphere the Central African and East African Federations were formed (Best and de Blij, 1997; Griffith, 1995; Konadu-Agyemang and Panford, 2006). At the time of Independence Africa was left with highly skewed and dependent economies, characterized by what were often mono-economies, dependent on European trade and economic linkages, and weak and poorly diversified skills bases and economies. While attempts were made to throw off what were perceived to be the ‘shackles’ of colonial oppression through efforts to promote unique forms of African development such as ‘Afro-Socialism’ and the active courting of links with the then USSR, China and the Eastern bloc, true economic independence from the West proved difficult to attain (Ayeni, 1997).

The early Independence era in countries such as Ghana, Zambia, Ethiopia and Tanzania was characterized by bold attempts to implement nationally appropriate strategies which often had a strong rural focus and an appeal to ‘self-reliance’ principles. The most extreme case was Tanzania which actively sought to cut off links with the external world and pursued an ambitious policy of rural development through a ‘villagization’ development scheme known as Ujaama. These strategies had their roots in pan-Africanism as espoused by key African leaders such as Nkrumah from Ghana and the belief in African self-reliance as advocated by leaders such as Kaunda in Zambia and Nyerere in Tanzania. In parallel, other countries and regimes, such as Kenyatta’s Kenya chose to pursue more Western market-based development strategies often with equally limited success (Davidson, 1994; Ayeni, 1997).

In this era the local state tended to have few powers of direct decision-making. Key powers rested with the central state which, in most cases, actively strove to develop national assets, often through targeted spatial development schemes. Some of the most apparent include significant investment in capital cities and in certain cases the creation of brand-new administrative capitals with Dodoma in Tanzania, Lilongwe in Malawi and Abuja in Nigeria being the most obvious. Investment in airports, sports stadia and administrative complexes has created artificial pseudo-western cities in what are often some of the poorest countries on the planet. The redevelopment of Abidjan in Ivory Coast is a case in point under the rule of Houphouet-Boigny (Bell, 1986; Griffith, 1995).

Another distinctive feature of this period which overlapped with attempts at self-reliance, was the desire for and pursuit of prestige projects to drive development. With the support of the global financial bodies there was, for example, significant investment in major river basin/large dam/HEP schemes. One of the most significant was the development of Lake Volta in Ghana which created a vast dam to supply electricity to the newly built aluminium smelter at Tema and which was also meant to facilitate irrigated farming and fishing. Parallel initiatives included Cabora Basa in Mozambique, Kariba between Zambia and Zimbabwe, the Aswan High Dam and multiple dam projects in Morocco. In almost all cases the schemes have not delivered the full range of anticipated benefits (Best and de Blij, 1977).

Within countries Western-style interventions such as a focus on the development of growth centres and support for industrial development nodes was supported to some degree within most African countries (Ayeni, 1997).
One of the most comprehensive assessments of this process was provided in the study by Alan Whiteside in 1981 who overviewed the pursuit of these strategies in various parts of Africa. Despite significant investment in infrastructure and industry, capital city dominance of the economies was not significantly altered and in countries such as Zimbabwe, which pursued growth centre planning through to the 1990s, the vast majority of the growth centres failed to ‘take off’. Problems include insufficient resources, inadequate incentives and a lack of market-based reasons for firms establishing in such centres. That said, in political terms, Zimbabwe was a fore-runner in establishing relatively high degrees of political decentralization (Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992).

The most comprehensive form of regional development pursued in Africa in this era was undoubtedly South Africa’s Regional Industrial Development Programme which meshed regional and growth centre planning with its then racist ideology of developing ‘racial reserves’ for the different tribal groupings in the country. Over 50 growth points were established and a package of incentives once described ‘as the most generous in the world’ were made available to prospective industrialists. Significant state investment, estimated at some 10 per cent of government expenditure in the late 1980s was needed to prop up a highly inefficient system which aided some 10 per cent of national industries and supported over 100,000 jobs (Rogerson, 1988; Nel, 1999). The cessation of the policy in the early 1990s witnessed the collapse of many of the former growth points and the closure of most of the firms, to the detriment of former employees in particular. Exceptions occurred in places which were better resourced and able to continue growing in the absence of incentives, such as the towns of George, Saldanha Bay and Isithebe. Studies have shown that firms generally failed to develop economic links with the host area and often remained on site only for the duration of the incentives, ceasing operations when the funding ceased. Extensive abuse of the system was also noted and, if anything, the South African case is something of an anti-model with respective to the concept of regional development anchored in these outlying industrial growth centres (Rogerson, 1988; Nel, 1999).

The contemporary context

Regional development (internal)

In parallel with international experience traditional regional development interventions fell into abeyance in the 1980s and 1990s, often resulting from limited success and budget constraints. Where regional development persisted in the period from the 1980s through to the 1990s it tended to have quite a distinctive project-based focus. This is shown in a comprehensive overview of Regional Development practice in the 1990s in Africa by the United Nations Commission for Human Settlement (UNHCS, 1997) which indicates the following broad themes:

i) River basin development – primarily in West Africa along the Niger River and Lake Chad
ii) Lake basin development, e.g. around Lake Victoria
iii) National development planning, e.g. in Zambia with associated efforts to address regional inequalities
iv) Growth centre planning, e.g. in Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya
v) New capital city development, e.g. Malawi, Nigeria and Tanzania
vi) Integrated rural development, e.g. in Tanzania.

In his critique of these approaches and the apparently limited success of the initiatives implemented, Ayeni (1997) indicates that these schemes suffered from both the application of inappropriate planning and theory and they were bedevilled with implementation problems. Difficulties included spatial bias in
implementation, poor policy analysis, the overwhelming focus of growth and migration on the big primate cities, and broader economic changes including structural adjustment which severely curtailed the role the state could play in the space-economies of African states.

One of the more successful and long-standing collaborative regional development arrangements exists in the Sengal River basin. Following the signing of the Bamako Convention in 1963 between Guinea, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal a series of enduring programmes have been enacted, revolving around the provision of water management, communications and power-generating infrastructure. High levels of engagement between partners have reduced conflict and facilitated economic development in areas such as fish farming and rice cultivation (Alam and Dione, 2006).

The recent revival and focus on more sophisticated and diverse forms of regional development in the developed world has few parallels in Africa. With certain South African exceptions, there are few examples of contemporary regional strategies such as global city development, science parks or high-tech industrial zones. Another exception has been South Africa’s reinvigoration of regional development in the late 1990s when a ‘Spatial Development Initiative’ programme focusing on defined transport and economic growth corridors was initiated, in parallel with the establishment of high-tech or export-orientated ‘Industrial Development Zones’ (Simon, 2003). While the former has only achieved limited success, in the case of the latter, significant investment in purpose-designed facilities with an export-orientated focus and having special tax concessions have seen the establishment of key port and industrial zones at Coega (near Port Elizabeth), East London and Richards Bay which are yielding initial success. Another noteworthy trend has been the recognition given to the emergence of various ‘industrial clusters’ and ‘innovation systems’ in Africa in recent years which generally have emerged with little, if any state support. Examples range from sophisticated manufacturing for the global car market, as exemplified by the Durban auto-cluster in South Africa, to more informal activities such as fish processing in Uganda and furniture manufacturing in Egypt (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and McCormick, 2007).

In parallel, there has been widespread experimentation with the concept of export processing in countries ranging from Liberia to Botswana and Zimbabwe. Earlier research by the ILO (in Nel, 1994) however found results to be disappointing. In addition to concerns about the limited success of interventions such as these, there remain the pressing challenges posed by rural areas which are subject to environmental degradation and economic decline, which also merit some form of regional support (Gooneratne and Obudho, 1997).

**Regional development (supranational)**

A distinctive feature of regional development practice and policy in Africa is widespread subscription to the principles of cross-border linkages within the continent for purposes of facilitating trade, social, cultural and economic exchange, peace-keeping and the overall promotion of pan-Africanism. International connectivity has a relative long history in the continent. The world’s oldest customs union is in fact the Southern African Customs Union formed in 1910, which now includes South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006). In addition, political Federations established in the 1950s in East and Central Africa laid the basis for later regional arrangements.

Makinda and Okumu (2008) argue that the proliferation of regional groupings in Africa came about because of the perceived need for both collective security and development in the post–Cold War era and in response to regional conflicts within the continent.
According to Adejombi and Olukoshi (in Cambria Press, 2008), slow economic progress and increasing marginalization of the continent at the global level have given significant impetus to new regional development strategies. The small size of national economies and the logic of establishing a collective voice through supranational arrangements (Griffith, 1995) has created what Bell (1986: 108) argues is a ‘powerful case’ for regional cooperation. The net result has been the veritable blossoming of a range of key initiatives discussed below.

The post-independence era in Africa was characterized by clear commitment in many parts of Africa to the principle of pan-Africanism and the determination of a unique and collaborative vision for the continent (Makinda and Okumu, 2008). This was initially advocated by first-generation independence leaders such as Lumumba, Kenyatta, Nyrere and Nkrumah. The latter argued for the idea that ‘Africa Must Unite’ (Griffith, 1995). Despite this, early attempts at a union between Guinea and Ghana and calls for greater degrees of regional integration met with little success in the 1960s and 1970s (Davidson, 1994). These concepts have since developed significantly, crystallizing in 1980 with the Lagos Plan of Action which laid the basis for seeking greater degrees of self-reliance through supranational arrangements. In 1963 the Organization of African Unity was formed as a loose political union amongst most of Africa’s states. This has since evolved into the African Union, established in 2001, which has now set up a Pan-African Parliament and which has as one of its goals the formation of an African Economic Community (Jannneh, 2006).

In addition to continent-wide initiatives, a not insignificant range of customs and nascent economic unions exist in Africa which has variously assisted with issues such as the provision of unified telecommunications networks in Southern Africa and the formation of regional peace-keeping forces in West Africa. As Ayeni (1997: 53) notes, if these organizations can succeed they ‘would have serious repercussions for processes of regional development all over the continent’. The key unions are as follows:

i) The Southern African Customs Union (SACU), established in 1910 as a customs union with joint revenue-sharing arrangements on tariffs derived from external trade (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006).

ii) The East African Community (EAC), first established in 1967 and revived in 2000, leading to the establishment of a customs union in 2005. A common market and political union are planned and a joint Legislative Assembly has been set up (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006).

iii) The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which was established in 1985 to promote regional economic cooperation, free trade and a customs union and eventually a Common Market in central Africa (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006).

iv) The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 by the Treaty of Lagos. It seeks collective ‘self-sufficiency’ through the development of an economic and monetary union and a trading bloc. Key organizations which it has established include a Community Court of Justice and a common peace-keeping arrangement (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006; Konadu-Agyemang and Panford, 2006).

v) The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), which was formed in 1994, replacing the earlier Preferential Trade Area, establishing a free trade area between nine of the member countries. There is an agreement to expand free trade arrangements with the EAC and SADC, which if finalized will create free trade zones encompassing nearly
50 per cent of the countries in Africa (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006; BBC, 2008).

vi) The Southern African Development Community (SADC) was formed in 1992 to replace an earlier political union in the region. The organization strives to promote socio-economic, political and security cooperation. Currently 12 countries have formed a free trade area and progress has been made with a range of joint projects in areas such as infrastructure, trade and health care (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006).

The Africa Free Trade Zone (AFTZ) formed by links between SADC, COMESA and EAC agreed on in 2008, and mentioned above, will link 26 countries with a GDP of some US$624 bn (BBC, 2008). At a grander level are the current and proposed activities of the African Economic Community (AEC) which seeks to utilize the above-mentioned regional groupings as ‘pillars’ for their proposed activities. The AEC was founded in 1991 through the Abuja Treaty and has helped promote the development of the regional trading blocs (Niang, 2006; Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006). The AEC is supported by all of Africa with the exception of the Arab Maghreb Union. Future goals are a proposed continent-wide customs union by 2019 and an African Common Market by 2023. The establishment of the AFTZ is clearly a key step in the attainment of these eventual goals (Janneh, 2006).

At a political level the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (1963) and its replacement with the African Union (AU) in 2001 have been the primary continent-wide forms of regional political collaboration and cooperation. Head quartered in Addis Abba, the AU seeks to promote socio-economic and political integration, to seek consensus and present common positions and to promote peace and security (Konadu-Agyemang and Panford, 2006; Makinda and Okumu, 2008). A Pan-African Parliament has been created which incorporates the entire continent with the exception of Morocco.

Mechanisms to promote peace-keeping, democracy and development have been put in place (Mohamoud, 2007). In 2007 a Union Government for Africa was mooted.

A parallel but linked international initiative which has been formally adopted by the AU is the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) established in 2001 through the merger of South Africa, Algeria and Nigeria’s Millennium Partnership plan and Senegal’s OMEGA plan (Konadu-Agyemang and Panford, 2006). NEPAD seeks to put in place mechanisms across the continent to eradicate poverty, promote sustainable growth and development, integrate Africa into the world economy and accelerate the empowerment of women (Niang, 2005; Mohamoud, 2007). Partnerships have since been developed with many of the world’s key financial bodies and programmes focusing on agriculture, science, e-schools, infrastructure and building continental institutions are being developed. In practice, slow progress, the lack of civil society participation and perceptions that NEPAD is working too closely with the ‘Washington Consensus’ organizations, and the dominance of South Africa in the organization are clearly concerns for several member states (Makinda and Okumu, 2008).

Challenges experienced by the various regional blocs discussed above include: under-resourcing, member countries participating in overlapping organizations, the pursuit of self-interest, limited supranational policing mechanisms, friction between members, limited mandates and long-standing conflicts, particularly in the Great Lakes region (Kyambalesa and Hougnikpo, 2006). Other concerns include the limited nature of cross-border infrastructure development and a continued dependence not on intra-African but inter-continental trade (Konadu-Agyemang and Panford, 2006). The UNCTAD (2009) argues that while substantial progress has been made to establish regional institutions, intra-African
trade, investment and people’s mobility have not increased significantly, leaving Africa with some of the most fragmented markets in the world. As a result a key UN report released in 2009 (UNCTAD, 2009) argues the case for enhancing ‘regional integration to build stronger and more resilient economies … Regional infrastructure, policy harmonization and increasing cross-border investment and labour mobility will help Africa benefit fully from economic opportunities provided by regional integration’.

One recent variant on the concept of regional development has been the promotion of a series of trans-frontier parks or game reserves, primarily between South Africa and its neighbours which has seen the removal of border fences and the creation of extensive, jointly managed international game parks (Simon, 2003).

Local development

Two broad themes characterize local development in Africa. The first is the formal empowerment of local governments through processes of decentralization to engage more directly with local development challenges. The second relates to processes which have always been in existence, namely the actions of local community groups desirous of improving living and economic conditions in their locality. This accords with the argument of Taylor (2005: 148) that in ‘contrast to formal approaches to regionalism, the New Regionalism Approach … has been more sensitive to “bottom-up” processes that are not considered by the more orthodox approaches’. In the view of Gooneratne and Obudho (1997) given the scale of the African economic crisis communities have to pursue local development options. They also recognize the key role NGOs can play in supporting local initiatives, often in the absence of state support. A particular concern for a range of authors is the need for governments to allow and to facilitate ‘local self-reliance’ by communities (Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992; Taylor and Mackenzie, 1992).

In terms of the theme of local government decentralization, partially driven by structural adjustment requirements and partially by the widespread pursuit of democratic engagement, there has been a dramatic shift in the locus of local government control from what in most countries was direct central government control of local governments to one which acknowledges and facilitates local control and decisions. The passage of decentralization policies in countries as diverse as Ghana and Zambia are hallmarks of this new era and the World Bank has noted how widespread the take-up of these policies has been (Gooneratne and Obudho, 1997; Hope, 2008). However, on-the-ground evidence in countries with well-established track records of decentralization practice over more than a decade indicates that deep-rooted operational challenges impede progress (Egziabher and Helmsing, 2005) – these include lack of skilled staff in localities, limited funds and what Stockmayer (1999) has termed the consequential ‘decentralization of poverty’ from being the responsibility from the central state to the local. The net result is often the inability to effect change on the ground, to provide needed infrastructure and the common challenge of only servicing the areas and communities which can pay, to the detriment of the marginalized majority. For example, in a city such as Lusaka only 10 per cent of areas have regular refuse removal.

A variant of local development is the more focused approach of Local Economic Development (LED) which has attracted some degree of attention across Africa. Whilst many countries such as Swaziland and Zambia have expressed interest in the LED approach and have put in place limited policy support, applied practice across Africa is however limited (Gooneratne and Obudho, 1997; Egziabher and Helmsing, 2005). The one exception is South Africa which is regarded as something of a front-runner in the policy and practice of LED (Rodríguez-Pose and
Tijmsitra, 2005). LED is now a legal requirement of local governments in that country and, interestingly, local governments have been challenged to implement policies of ‘developmental local government’ which implies being conscious of encouraging development-related outcomes from all their actions (Nel, 1999; Nel and Rogerson, 2005). Experience varies widely in the country from that of small, impoverished rural municipalities, which are only able to support limited community projects in activities such as community tourism and farming to the large metropoles which are pursuing globally competitive marketing and investment strategies (Rogerson, 1997). Cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town have positioned themselves on the world stage as ‘global cities’ replete with modern airports, sports stadia, convention centres, business and tourism support programmes and various forms of informal sector support (Nel and Rogerson, 2005). Evidence however suggests that outcomes, though often impressive, seldom devolve down to communities most in need in the big cities. In smaller urban centres the lack of progress is more evident where municipalities are unable to effect change, often through a lack of resources and staff. A net result of the limitations experienced by ‘developmental local government’ in both large and small centres have been widespread civil sector protests against local governments’ restricted delivery in recent years (Nel et al., 2009). At a broader level in Africa there is growing recognition of the role local governments can play in development processes as indicated by the recent establishment of the ‘Municipal Development Partnership for Eastern and Southern Africa’. Based in Harare in Zimbabwe, this organization is promoting research and collaborative exchanges between local governments. It also works with the ‘Africa Local Government Action Forum’ which has a primary focus, amongst others, on the promotion of LED (MDP, 2009).

At the community level, the recognition in the 1970s that development along the lines proposed by the Diffusionist and Modernization approaches was not succeeding in addressing mass poverty in Africa galvanized a reinterpretation of development interventions and approaches. This included at one level the acknowledgement that ‘basic needs’-type interventions were probably a more appropriate line to follow, and second, there was the recognition of the informal or ‘second economy’ as often being the largest part of the economy in many areas (Pacione, 2001; Hope, 2008). This led to the work of the ILO and Hart and the application of Reformist approaches throughout much of the continent in a targeted effort to support the newly recognized micro-entrepreneurial sector (Hope, 2008). In the 1980s the scale of the debt crisis and negative economic growth in the poorest communities forced many rural communities back into subsistence and the frequent reliance on barter and parallel economic systems. It is at this level that despite numerous constraints, NGOs have been the most active and governments have attempted various low-level support measures such as the provision of market facilities and extension support to farmers and entrepreneurs. In parallel, a significant volume of literature on this dimension of local development has emerged. Prominent in this regard were the research and policy proposals of Gooneratne and Mbilinyi (1992) based at the United Nations Centres for Regional Development regional office in Nairobi, Kenya. In addition, the work of Baker (1990) and Baker and Pederson (1992) and researchers based at the Africa Studies Centre in Uppsala in Sweden exposed the realities of rural and urban livelihoods, and local economic adaptation in order to survive. While the overall economic situation has improved in many parts of Africa since the 1980s and 1990s, for the majority of the poor, self-reliance initiatives at the local/community and family levels remain critical survival. As outlined by Taylor and Mackenzie (1992) and Egziabher and Helmsing (2005), initiatives such as the production of charcoal, basic metal
and craft products are often critical in assuring economic survival. In parallel, more recent writings on rural and urban livelihood strategies intimate just how important it is for communities to have multiple livelihood strategies and sources of income in order to ensure survival. While often poorly understood and difficult to directly support, it is apparent that for a significant number of Africa’s residents this form of ‘local development’ is critical to their survival. Future research and policy support in these areas will be critical for the long-term well-being of Africa’s residents (Egziabher and Helmsing, 2005).

Conclusion

As the world’s poorest continent, and as the one least likely to attain the Millennium Development Goals, Africa’s development challenges are clearly significant and profound. Africa suffers from the inherited legacy of regional development interventions set up to link the continent’s key resource nodes, at a subsidiary level into the global economy. Post-Independence regional development interventions have tended to support either the capital cities or have been high-profile developments which have seldom achieved the envisaged success and they have seldom benefited those most in need. In the present era, of note at the international level are strenuous efforts to lay the basis for various regional economic unions which might well culminate one day in an African economic union. In parallel with state-driven regional development interventions, local development, either through emerging local government interventions or more long-established community-based endeavours, though often achieving only marginal success, remain critical for the economic well-being of the majority of Africa’s population.

In terms of the way forward, future regional and local development in Africa needs to take cognizance of several trends and realities. These include persistent poverty and marginalization, the rapid urbanization which is taking place, and the existence of major urban development and management challenges. In addition, as Ayeni (1997) argues, future strategies will need to be more participatory in focus, and adhere more to principles of decentralization. Major resource, funding and staffing constraints compromise the ability to effect change and clearly require urgent attention. That said, endeavours to promote trade between countries in Africa through lowering customs barriers, widespread embracing of the principles of decentralization, the uptake of the concept of LED and support for community-based interventions are cause for optimism about the future.

References


Further reading


