

Building Blocks And Processes For Establishing Knowledge Societies In Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

After establishing the undeniable importance of knowledge as ingredient for happy living in the 21st century, this paper probes into the pertinent question 'which types of knowledge may guarantee the sustainable development of Sub-Saharan Africa?'. The paper argues that the establishment of the modern knowledge society (all human societies having been eternal learning or knowledge societies) is linked to the modern concept of globalisation whose core mission is to promote learning and the knowledge of the new world economic order established and advertised from the North. After highlighting the nefarious effects of uncritical adoption of Western concept of knowledge society, the paper advises that while it is proper for Sub-Saharan Africa to share in knowledge advertised by the North, that which would guarantee sustainable development of Africa is a critical integration of pieces of knowledge drawn from both the Global North and the Global South.

Key words: Knowledge society; Sub-Saharan Africa; sustainable development; critical approach to knowledge society.

INTRODUCTION

As the world moves to close the second decade of the 21st century, the recognition that knowledge is key to successful and happy living going forward is made more strident and evident through the media, academia and government organs. The current notion of knowledge society itself derives from the fact that beyond the middle of the 20th century, human knowledge exploded (Buchanan, 2016) offering enormous possibilities for improvement in the realms of health, science, technology, exploration, commerce and other countless human endeavours. This is not to say that human affairs have not been guided by knowledge from time immemorial. However, beginning from the middle of the 20th century, the speed with which humans became able to generate and accumulate knowledge increased exponentially to a point where it became necessary to devise new ways of organising and classifying knowledge if knowledge is not to overwhelm humanity.

Whereas all human societies transformed and innovated through time, human transformation and innovation neither followed the same trajectories all the time nor were the typologies of knowledge generated in all societies similar through the times. The implication of this

submission is that a knowledge society has building blocks with which it is deliberately and consciously erected. Knowledge is obviously the most major of these building blocks. However, Knowledge is derived from learning and education and learning and education derive their legitimacy and functionality from socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). On their part, the processes of learning and education construct social reality through the operationalisation of important and fundamental social elements such as language, belief systems, social interactions, social institutions (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) and natural human drive for innovation.

The fact that human societies are different in the areas of language, belief systems, types of social interactions and social institutions and levels of drive for innovation would suggest the impossibility of the establishment of a single type of knowledge based society for the world. The aim of the present paper is to examine the role that sociological elements play in the establishment of knowledge based societies and the model that may be adopted by developing societies in general and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular to promote the establishment of a knowledge society in the 21st century.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current discussion is carried out within the framework of three theories, namely the sociology of knowledge theory, the ontogeny theory and sustainable development theory.

Sociology of Knowledge Theory

From the general area of sociology of knowledge it is learnt that knowledge is socially constructed and that language, social institutions, educational institutions, belief systems and social interactions are the sources to which the finally constructed knowledge owes its birth and from which it draws and continues to draw its relevance, vitality and resilience (Maton, Hood & Shay, 2016; Maton, 2014; Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Within the study area of Sociology of Knowledge, there exist a number of theories including Mannheim's, Camic, Gross & Lamont's and Berger and Luckmann's.

Mannheim (1936) describes the influence of ideology on the understanding of the social world. He demonstrates that the ideology (socialism, communism, capitalism, etc.) that an individual and society may be exposed to, irresistibly confers an understanding of the social milieu that is consistent with the demands and expectations of the relevant ideology the individual and society may have been exposed to. Camic, Gross & Lamont's (2014) discourse the role of organised academic on the process that leads to the shaping of social understanding. They submit that educational institutions play a great role in shaping the individual and society's understanding of the world they live in. Berger and Luckmann (1991) draw attention to the manner in which the ordinary person makes sense of the world s/he lives in through the intelligent combination of the symbols obtained from language, social interactions and other informal and non-formal learning available within his/her interactive milieu. Berger and Luckmann's theory of Sociology of knowledge is relied upon to advance the argument in this discussion because

- i). The relevance of political ideologies fall outside the scope of the current discussion and
- ii). The aspect of the school system (higher education) that creates knowledge is yet to become an important industry in the developing world in general and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular as it is espoused later in this discussion.

Ontogeny Theory

The theory of Ontogeny on the other hand speaks to the total cycle of human development. This total cycle includes the biological developmental process (the natural development of the

physical organism including the genotypical and phenotypical [how genotypes are expressed] inheritances, the cultural baggage (intangible [language, world view, music, etc.] and tangible [artefacts and material representations of culture]) and the process of socialisation of a people (individualism, collectivism, communalism, etc.) (Blunden, 2012; Nsamenang, 2006). The main deposition of the ontogenic theory is that the human being is a complex of organic, cultural and social realities. In other words, the human being is influenced and draws his/her expression from organic inheritances from his/her genealogy, exposure to specific cultural practices and modes of socialisation.

Sustainable Development Theory

The concept referred to as 'sustainable development' arose as a direct result of the observed devastating effect of the classical economic theory on the ecological habitat of the human being. The operationalization of the classical economic theory or economic growth theory that characterised the notion of human or societal development between Adam Smith's (1776) *The Wealth of Nations* and the birth of neo-classical economic theorists was annihilating the human habitat (mineral, vegetable and animal resources) at such an astronomically rapid speed that a genuine concern for the survival of mother earth was made loud from the middle of the 20th century (Baker, Kousis, Richardson & Young, 2002). The immediate reaction to the gradual depletion of the earth was that economic growth should come to a stop in all societies (Baker et al. 2002). The suggestion for growth arrest having been robustly criticised, the world engaged in myriad debates and discussions until 1987 when the United Nations General Assembly synthesized all arguments and bought into the submission that states that sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (United Nations, 1987 p.43). However, the theory of sustainable development is a complex of economic, social, ecological and political ethos which, beyond the United Nations' definition, implies that an individual and/or a people should be equipped with financial and material resources, skills and motivation to keep steady on the path for development when all external support may have ceased and/or when the chips come down.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEORIES

Taken together, the first two theories (sociology of knowledge and ontogeny) suggest that the individual and the human community are made up of concentric layers of organic, cultural and social properties at the centre of which lays a nucleus that unifies all the three properties to confer on the individual the attribute of an equilibrated being and on the community the quality of a distinguishable human agglomeration. For the sake of clarification and distinction in terminologies, we may wish to refer to this individual and community nucleus as the psyche of the individual and that of the community. This psyche is an intangible living phenomenon within which the organic, cultural and social attributes of man (human being) and society have crystallised with the view to providing man and society with some measure of consistent and constant stability. As a living phenomenon, the psyche learns and is therefore able to imbibe new concepts and postures which ultimately enable it to adjust to new situations and conditions. Unfortunately, the capacity for the display of adjustments is not unlimitedly elastic at least within a given time stretch. Hence the notion of resistance. Usually, there comes a time when an individual and/or community resists change and time and other factors are usually deployed to facilitate change in a future period.

Within this context then, is it possible to establish one knowledge society type for the world? If the establishment of a single knowledge society for the world is the secret dream of some, what other factors apart from time needs to be deployed for the actualisation of this venture? What would be the knowledge content of such a single knowledge society? Would such a single

knowledge society be sustainable? Since sustainability implies stability derived from owned or solidly and profoundly possessed inner human and outward material resources.

KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY: ITS MEANING AND HISTORY

The concepts 'knowledge society', 'knowledge economy', 'lifelong learning' and 'globalisation' are somewhat currently united and related in the minds of many a person albeit loosely and sometime confusedly. This is because these terminologies have been used interchangeably at important official gatherings. Upon scrutiny, it can be seen that indeed the ideas of learning, knowledge and information run through the first three concepts ('knowledge society', 'knowledge economy', 'lifelong learning') in an obvious manner. How then about 'globalisation'? The ideas of learning and knowledge are not obvious within the terminology 'globalisation', yet, this is one construct that has served as a powerful poke in pushing the concept of knowledge society to great visibility.

The process of globalisation aims to break down as much as possible, all barriers (physical and non-physical) that keep human beings separated and apart. Hence, it can be said that globalisation is a process of enacting regulations that would eliminate or reduce significantly restrictions that may separate human beings living in different parts of the world. Although both the concept and practice of globalisation are thought of as being recent phenomena, Arku & Arku (2011) have argued that the genesis of globalisation must be traced to the era of European colonisation. Undoubtedly, much learning attended the process of colonialism wherein the colonisers learnt a great deal about the colonised (even if, going by initial reports, some of that learning was tainted with cynicism and deliberate distortions) and the colonised learnt about the colonisers. Here then lies the connection between knowledge and globalisation.

However, that which makes of 'globalisation' an important issue within the context of knowledge society is not this parsimonious connection to knowledge. It is a recent development that has made of 'globalisation' a vehicle of free trade. In addition to acknowledging that the construct 'globalisation' has developed through myriad stages (from European colonialism through imposition of Western development model to free trade), Saul (2004) as cited in Arku & Arku (2011) has suggested that the current concept and practice of globalisation was motivated by the search for cheaper labour beyond the shores of Europe and the United States of America

....Others argue that what actually opened the door to globalisation were the economic crisis and recession of 1973 and 1979 and environmental regulations and other restrictions on company activities that appeared more and more in industrial countries throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. This new ideology of globalisation was then considered an all inclusive strategy because it contained the answer to all problems (Saul, 2004 as cited in Arku & Arku, 2011 p.2)

Therefore, in an attempt to escape the business and environmental restrictions of Europe and America, the third wave of globalisation was instituted to enable European and other international conglomerates to manufacture cheaper offshore and sell throughout the world. The third concept of globalisation was easily sold to the rest of the world and especially to developing countries through its purported advantages that include creation of employment, the spreading of the wealth from the North which hitherto was concentrated within the borders of a few countries and poverty alleviation through the mainstreaming of small and medium scale businesses into international conglomerates' activities (McCbburey, 2016; Sethy, 2016).

Needless to say that youth unemployment is rife in Sub-Saharan Africa at the rate of 48.1% (International Labour Organisation, 2015) and without the aggressive prosecution of the millennium development goals, extreme poverty would not have been halved by the end of 2015 (United Nations, 2015). Yet, 'globalisation' remains an important cousin of 'knowledge society' because globalisation now implies an interaction among national economies as it relates to 'production, trading and financial transactions' (Sethy, 2016) and knowledge society is the promotion of a society wherein new methods and processes of goods production and wealth generation and the best practices in the use of these goods and services are to be constantly learnt. Consequently, Boshier (2010) cannot conceive of the establishment of a knowledge society without a partnership among government, the civil society and the market.

Whichever angle it is examined from, it is found that knowledge society connotes economy related and labour intensive knowledge and learning activities. The learning and knowledge that enable the North to create the wealth and establish the type of knowledge society being discussed are generated at the higher education level where about half of the North's population acquires the mental orientation and skills required to establish a knowledge society (World Bank, 2015; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014). Conversely, higher education is virtually non-existent in developing countries in general and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Statistical data exist to support this statement. While appraising the health of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, the following was said:

....the overall gross enrolment ratio for Sub-Saharan Africa was about 7%, that ratio was as low as 0.5% for Malawi, 2.0% for Chad and Eritrea, 2.5% for Central African Republic, and 2.7% for Burundi (Teferra, 2014 p. 11).

As if this was not gloomy enough, about 40% of the few highly qualified African academics migrate abroad yearly (Marfouk, 2007). About 50% of African students that successfully complete their post-graduate studies in developed countries stay put and do not return to their countries of origin (Musumba, Jin & Mjelde, 2007). Unlike Asian and Latin American higher education institutions who receive generous yearly financial support from European Union through Asia-Link and ALFA programmes, African tertiary institutions are not on the priority list of Europe in respect of financial support (Mohamoud, 2005). As a result of the 'publish or perish' policy in African universities and the inability of African governments to adequately fund research, African academics have relegated community engagement activities to the rear (Preece, 20011). Yet, one non-negotiable role of higher education in all societies is to stimulate and indeed lead both minor and major development initiatives and outputs as stated earlier.

No wonder it has been found out that foreign aid to developing and African countries has remained unproductive as a result of the absence in these countries of adequate qualitative human capital to drive development (United Nations, 2006). Which knowledge society are we talking about then, if Africa is so disconnected from the factors and indicators of a modern knowledge society? Is there a type of knowledge more compelling and more pervasive which is currently interfering with the total inculcation and absorption of the relevant knowledge needed for the establishment of a modern knowledge society in Africa? Is there anything in Africans that seems to delay the adoption of those attributes that may promote the establishment of a modern knowledge society? Is there a right policy that is yet to be put in place by African countries with a view to establishing a modern knowledge society?

The answer to each of these questions is yes! Sub-Saharan Africa is yet to acquire both the environment and the skills necessary to establish and operate the type of knowledge society under discussion because

- i. The formal, non-formal and informal knowledge within which the African has been socialised remains more compelling and more pervasive and currently interferes with the total absorption of the relevant knowledge needed for the establishment of modern knowledge society?
- ii. The psyche of the African which continues to retain the fruits of the formal, non-formal and informal knowledge earlier received is yet to be significantly purged of the African-ness resident within this initial knowledge to make way for those attributes that may promote the establishment of a modern knowledge society?
- iii. Africa still lacks a realistic policy of socio-economic development that may promote sustainable development on the basis of the current realities of its human, material and financial resources with only such an external assistance that will not distort the realities on the ground.

QUO VA DIS?

The globalisation of the economies of the nation-states making up the world is not in doubt. It is foolhardy to deny this. No suggestion is therefore made here that Sub-Saharan Africa should or could remain indifferent or insulated from the globalised world economy.

However, after these years spanning the 1980s and 2000s, a number of lessons have been learnt about the effects of globalisation on typologies of societies the world over, to inform the kinds of knowledge societies which may be realistic and functional to work for within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, it is known that:

- i. In spite of the propaganda to the contrary, the introduction of technology and increase in productivity have led to more job losses than they have created in developing countries and Africa (McCubbrey, 2016; Sethy, 2016).
- ii. Globalization has contributed to the slowing down of poverty alleviation and has in some instances exacerbated extreme poverty and social inequality in developing countries and Africa (McCubbrey, 2016; Sethy, 2016) and
- iii. Globalization has contributed to the destruction of village and small scale industries in numerous developing and African countries (McCubbrey, 2016; Sethy, 2016).

Under conditions such as these, Sub-Saharan Africa needs to evolve a Knowledge society that will make available for learning, both its indigenous knowledge systems and knowledge from outside its systems. The learning advocated here must be one that is critical; that is, one that seeks to integrate both knowledges (the inside and the outside) with a view to utilising them to benefit the largest possible number of people. By this token, the establishment of a knowledge society in Sub-Saharan Africa is not a simplistic process wherein a group of organisations, usually external to Africa, would determine the contents of needed learning and the application of same to the day to day living style of the citizenry. Complacency on the part of Africans in this matter would be near genocidal as it has proven to be to some extent already.

Fortunately, the adoption of the 2015-30 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals lays emphasis on the construct 'sustainable' which beyond enabling the supply of earth resources beyond one generation, equally implies the ability to employ such methods and approaches that would facilitate the prosecution of each of the 17 goals in a continuous and sustained manner.

CONCLUSION

While learning cannot but be lifelong during the 21st century and while no group of human beings may live in isolation in the century of unparalleled developments in all fields of human

endeavours, the Sub-Saharan African knowledge society must offer opportunities for both self-learning and learning of the unknown.

Self-learning encompasses the learning of those knowledge systems that naturally lay within the borders of the countries making up the continent. It also includes introspection that is deep enough to afford the continent the opportunity to embark on development projects in a sustained manner (without abandoning developing projects as a result of stoppage of in-flow of outside resources). Learning of the unknown on the other hand is learning of those pieces of knowledge which are good and potentially productive within the Sub-Saharan African space but which did not necessarily originate from within. A balanced integration of the two systems of knowledge rather than the uncritical absorption and adoption of anything that is external to Africa may constitute a useful and beneficial content of a workable knowledge society for Sub-Saharan Africa.

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